THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO **XBOX 360** AND **XBOX ONE**

Issue 136 April 2016 www.gamesradar.com/oxm

XBOX

THE OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

FIRST LOOK

Overwatch

Can Blizzard's radical take on the FPS take the Xbox One by storm?



LEGO STAR WARS
THE FORCE AWAKENS
BLOCKBUSTER TURNS BRICKBUSTER ON XBOX ONE!

DARK SOULS III

Hands-on with the RPG that eats Skyrim for breakfast. Is this the toughest Dark Souls yet?

Future

XBOX ONE EXCLUSIVE



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GamesMaster

Welcome...
IS THIS THE GREATEST SOULS YET?



Making *OXM* is not unlike playing *Dark Souls*: we begin every month scrabbling in the dark for an idea of what we're meant to be doing, we face tough bosses (features) with long health bars (word counts) and live in a world where the skies are permanently grey (Bath). Oh, and there's a giant, undead knight in our cafeteria. As such, we're ideal candidates to guide you around the world of *Dark Souls III* – Tom has played more of (and died more often in) Miyazaki's latest adventure than any other journalist. Head to page 30 to see if the current king of RPGs can hold onto its crown.

Speaking of sequels to incredibly popular things (stick with me on this), *Official Xbox Magazine* itself is about to undergo an exciting transformation.

"TOM HAS PLAYED MORE OF MIYAZAKI'S ADVENTURE THAN ANY OTHER JOURNALIST"

We've spent the past five months redesigning the magazine to ensure it better serves the needs of the modern Xbox fan. From next month it'll offer even better access to the biggest games. Why not subscribe today to guarantee a copy? For now, enjoy the issue.

Matthew

EMAIL matthew.castle@futurenet.com
LIVE OXM Pesto TWITTER @mrbasil_pesto

SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE! TURN TO PAGE 60

1

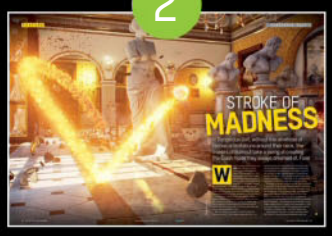


DARK SOULS III: RISE FROM THE ASHES

Tom braves zombies, demonic trees and – eek! – the 7:34 from Bristol to Paddington to bring you an in-depth look (p30)

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2



IS DANGEROUS GOLF A SMASHING SUCCESS?

The creators of *Burnout* aim their sights on golf. Bring a broom (p52)

3



OVERWATCH: THE BRAVE AND THE BOLD

Blizzard returns to console to show us how an FPS should be done (p62)

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FAR CRY PRIMAL REVIEWED

Are you ready for another *mammoth* undertaking? (p70)

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THE 15 GREATEST BOSSES ON XBOX

What do you mean I'm not one of them? That is some BS (p94)

Meet the... OXM CONTRIBUTORS

The people behind, within, and in one case, outside, the UK's biggest games mag



Alex Dale
Deputy editor

Live ChocoboOfDoom

Twitter @SporadicDaler

A long-time *Burnout* fan/jerk, Alex is into smashing all kinds of stuff – cars, windows, Matthew's '#1 Boss' coffee mug. Which made him the #1 choice to explore the *Burnout* team's new game, *Dangerous Golf*.



Tom Stone
Staff writer

Live OXM Tom Stone

Twitter @TheTomStrange

Our resident *Dark Souls* expert limbered up for his finger-melting playthrough of the threequal (page 30) by trying other things near-impossible, such as sneezing with his eyes open, and finding *Mrs Brown's Boys D'Movie* funny.



Joe Skrebels
Community manager

Live OXM Joe

Twitter @2plus2isjoe

Joe wrote this issue's 'Best Bosses' feature (page 94): oddly, despite Matthew giving him 'encouragement beatings' with his 'motivation baton', he doesn't feature. On an unrelated note, this is Joe's last issue. Adieu!

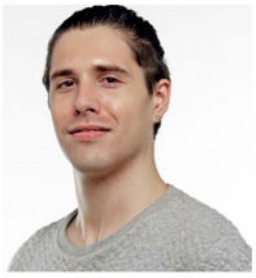


Chris Thursten
Contributor

Live Undisclosed

Twitter @CThursten

Chris, who took a look at *Overwatch* for us this issue (page 62), is editor of PC Gamer Pro – a site for 'professional gamers'. What, is he calling us amateurs, or something? Don't expect to see Chris here again.



Ben Griffin
Contributor

Live Benjamin Three

Twitter @gamegriffin

As Ben Griffin is 1) the spitting image of time-travelling punk Biff Tannen and 2) a massive, stone-age tool, he was the logical choice to review *Far Cry Primal* (page 70). He talks in tongues about 'spirit rhinos' now.

OFFICE PLAYLIST > WHAT WE'VE SPENT OUR TIME ON THIS MONTH



Rocket League
Better late than never! This moreish car/soccer mash-up is our new obsession.



Rainbow Six Siege
We're the boss at Terrorist Hunt on Hard, but useless like wheels on a duck on Hardcore. Why?



Burnout Revenge
Inspired by our *Dangerous Golf* visit. Not the best *Burnout* perhaps, but definitely the loudest. Crrrunch!



Killer Instinct
Insert something really catty about *KI* being a great fighting game that works perfectly online here.

OXM on GR+



The world's best games mag also occupies a corner of the world's best games website – makes sense, doesn't it? Head to **gamesradar.com/oxm** for the latest Xbox news and reviews, literally several of which are online exclusive.
Recent highlights: *Far Cry Primal* totally has an *Assassin's Creed* Easter egg / *Town of Light* brings psychological horror to Xbox One / The next big *Halo 5* multiplayer mode is... pancake flipping?

OXM on iPad



Papercuts! Pages stuck together! Meeting that person you want to avoid on the way to the shops! Physical media is fraught with danger. Avoid them all by trying our digital edition, enhanced with exclusive videos, galleries and audio commentary from the team.
bit.ly/ipadoxm

XBOX THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE #136

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Coincidentally, we only died three times exploring the entire opening of *Dark Souls III*. Note: this is a lie.

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Alex discovers what the mad ex-*Burnout* devs have done to the world's dullest sport.

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Blizzard returns to consoles, to show the pretenders how multiplayer shooting is really done.

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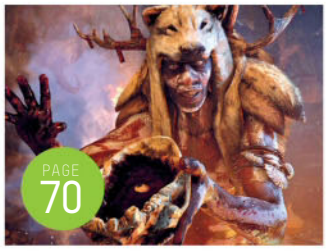
XBOX EXTRA

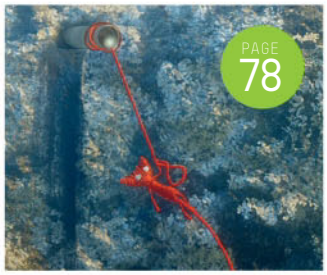
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Inspired by *Dangerous Golf*, we explore the weirdest sports games on Xbox.

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What's London like after we've finished *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*? Spoiler: the weather's still horrid.

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Returning to Rome to finish stabbing everyone we forgot in 2010, in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*.



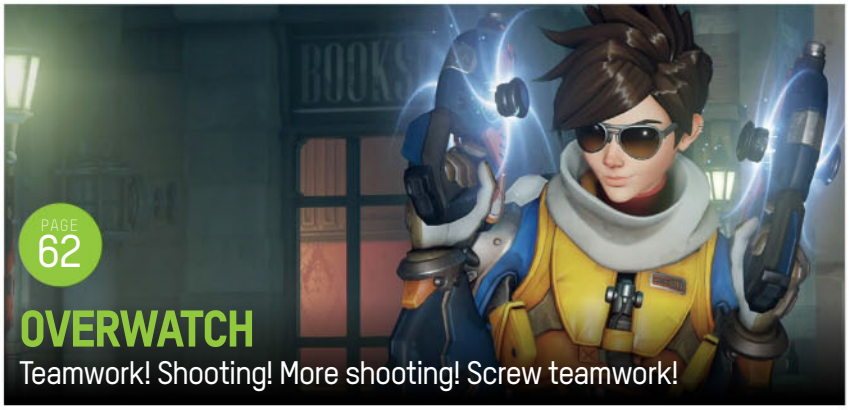












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ROCK THE DAGOBAH

DUPLO REN

Lego The Force Awakens heads up a Death Star-sized crop of exciting new Star Wars games

Traveller's Tales must be bricking it. As wildly successful as its *Lego* tie-in games have been over the past decade, you wonder if it's running out of films to parody. We've seen blockified send-ups of everything from *Batman* to *Harry Potter* to *Jurassic Park* to *Lord of the Rings*. At the rate the Cheshire-based studio is burning through the IMDB list, we're surely not more than a few years removed from witnessing *Lego Misery* and *Lego Clockwork Orange*. But before Traveller's Tales gets around to scraping the bottom of the psychological thriller barrel, there's a new kid on the, ahem, block that's just a-beggin' to get the stud-ification treatment: introducing *Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

Readers with memories longer than the 'List of changes in *Star Wars* re-releases' Wikipedia page will recall that the paths of Lego and Traveller's Tales first crossed in 2005, with *Lego Star Wars* on the original Xbox. And in our opinion, the Lego brand never found a better fit. The wide-eyed innocence of the original films was a perfect fit for Traveller's Tales' impish sense of humour. Seeing iconic scenes such as the bar room shootout and Vader and Luke's duel remastered through the yellow, expressive lens of *Lego* was like getting our nostalgia glands tickled *and* kissed at the same time. That it managed to rattle through the entire six films without the cast uttering a single syllable only added to the charm, and only reinforces how baggy later additions in the series have got now they're built to bigger budgets.

Perhaps *The Force Awakens* is the film to push the reset button on the *Lego* game series just as capably as it reset years of iffy *Star Wars* universe building on the part of Lucas and co. Early indications are good: even the Finn/Poe bromance has nothing on our love for the game's debut trailer. No spoilers, but it sets the scene for the blocky buffoonery that's to follow.



Aww! Look at Lego BB-8. We wanna stick a Lego flowerpot on its head-stud when it's not looking.



Assassin's Creed says no to greed

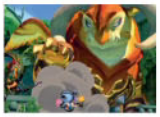
There'll be no new *Assassin's Creed* for 2016, with a distant 2017 entry rumoured to be set in ancient Egypt. According to Ubisoft boss Yves Guillemot, this isn't an anomaly; you can expect the series to take more regular annual breaks in the future.



Quantum leaps onto Windows 10

Some Xbox One owners have got huffy about the news that one-time Xbox One exclusive *Quantum Break* is now heading to PC. But get a load of this: if you digitally pre-order the Xbox version, you get the Windows one for free! It's out on 5 April.





Gigantic problems at Motiga?

Remember *Gigantic*? The free-to-play online battle game is allegedly in trouble due to money woes. Despite this, still expect it on Xbox One - it ran a beta in February.



Lego Millennium Falcon! That's the kind of set that has kids screaming "Wow!" and parents screaming, "Well, there goes my evening."

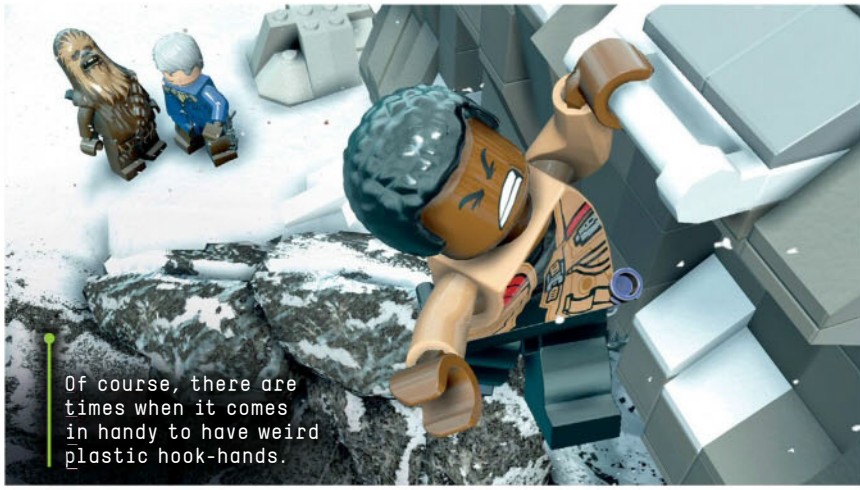
The ever-resourceful scavenger Rey assembles a speeder bike from what looks like the dregs of a dentist's waiting room's Lego pit and zips across the baking sands of Jakku; zoom in and you'll see a 'BB on board' bumper sticker – a typical Traveller's Tales touch. Elsewhere in the galaxy, the usually unflappable pilot Poe Dameron is getting his rigid plastic claws in a tangle at the controls of an X-Wing, his cockpit button-mashing activating everything from the radio to a toaster. Meanwhile, emo villain Kylo Ren finds the latest reason to blast out some My Chemical Romance – his home-made lightsaber is backfiring worse than the Millennium Falcon on MOT day. It's clear vehicles are a huge focus and this is reflected in a twist that makes this one of the more open-ended *Lego* games; when you hit upon a stud pile, you're prompted to choose between different vehicles that can be built, allowing you to tackle levels as you see fit.

BRIDGING THE GAPS

While a straight runthrough of the film's events appeals, the story will provide even more fanservice than that. Traveller's Tales has been granted permission to fill in some of the plot gaps that have opened up in the time that has passed between *Return of the Jedi* and *The Force Awakens*. These optional missions are romantically called 'bridge content' and are unlocked by collecting gold studs, and will solve such mysteries as the origin of C-3PO's red arm and how, exactly, Han Solo and Chewbacca captured the Rathtars that are aboard their ship.

Not only is the prospect of this new *Lego Star Wars* game adding to the universe's lore exciting, but it's exciting to be excited about *Star Wars* lore again. After the original trilogy took a big dump on our childhood, we were looking forward to the prospect of more *Star Wars* backstory as much as we would a 13-hour transatlantic flight in a middle seat between Jabba the Hutt and Jar-Jar Binks. If Disney has made *Star Wars* cool again, then it's also made it prolific, with three films – *Rogue One*, *Episode VIII* and an untitled Han Solo film – scheduled to arrive over the next three years.

Disney's official gaming partner Electronic Arts has put its best studios



Of course, there are times when it comes in handy to have weird plastic hook-hands.

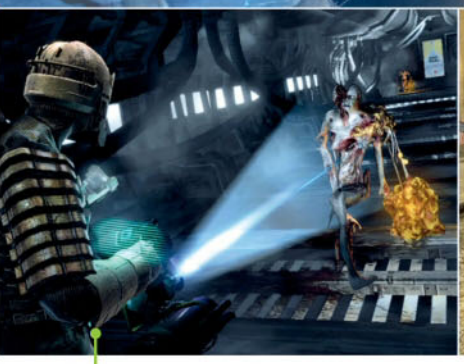


Halo 4 lead writer joins Bungie

Christopher Schlerf, last seen working on *Mass Effect Andromeda*, has been snapped up by Bungie to work on *Destiny*. Er, what happened in *Halo 4*, again?



Hopefully *Star Wars Battlefront*'s DLC can lure us back into battle, as our copy's frozen in carbonite, Han Solo-style.





Visceral nailed space-horror with *Dead Space*, but any Solo tie-in would need a lighter tone. Han cut off arms first?

on the case in an attempt to keep up with Mickey Mouse's incessant money-churning factory. We've already examined in these pages the evidence that Visceral Games – the studio behind *Dead Space* – is working on a third-person, open-world adventure based around a younger Han Solo; with *Uncharted* writer Amy Hennig and former *Assassin's Creed* producer Jade Raymond on board, there's some serious programming muscle behind this project. Whether it's a direct tie-in with the Han Solo film or not, the smart money is on Visceral's game releasing closer to the film's 2018 release date than today. Hope for a taster at E3.

Visceral Games has been bullish about its *Star Wars* plans on social media, but BioWare isn't so forthcoming. One interesting titbit is BioWare's Austin studio – responsible for the 2011 MMORPG *Star Wars: The Old Republic* – is recruiting for a new, unannounced project. Nonetheless, most RPG fans will be rooting for a new entry in the long-dormant *Knights of the Old Republic* series – BioWare being the studio responsible for the very first *KotOR*, which was released on Xbox back in 2003.

While *Lego Star Wars: Force Awakens* is due to arrive on 26 June, EA's games might seem like they're in a galaxy far, far away. But fret not: EA DICE has your six over the coming year, with a deluge of new *Star Wars Battlefront* expansion packs – one for every season. By the time you read this, *Outer Rim* should've hit, which takes the battle to Jabba's palace and the industrial factories of Sullust. This summer's *Bespin* takes us to the titular cloud city, while autumn's *Death Star* takes us to that big space station we all love. All in all, the next few years offer a new hope for *Star Wars* fans.

Alex Dale

//IF DISNEY HAS MADE STAR WARS COOL AGAIN, THEN IT'S ALSO MADE IT PROLIFIC, WITH THREE FILMS SCHEDULED OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS//

THIS MONTH WE LEARNED...

p13



It's better down where it's wetter, if you like your games *Metroid*-y.

p14



Pet Radscorpions will totally be a thing, thanks to *Fallout 4*'s DLC.

p17



Titanfall 2 has a story – and it's grittier than a 60p sausage roll.

p18



Real-life driving skills don't necessarily translate to *Forza 6*.

p22



How *Mirror's Edge* makes *Assassin's Creed* cities look flat like pancakes.

TEN PRO TIPS

THIS MONTH:

HOW TO MAKE A GAME ABOUT CARS PLAYING FOOTBALL

Vice President of Psyonix Jeremy Dunham explains how the studio created the multiplayer phenomenon Rocket League



These athletes swap inflated salaries for inflated tyres.

1 You can't plan for inspiration

The idea was originally an accident. *Rocket League*'s predecessor, *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars*, began as a more traditional vehicular combat game. One day, for the heck of it, one of our level designers dropped a ball into the prototype level. That was a lot of fun, so they added goals to take it a step further. The old game was scrapped, and *SARPBC* was born.

2 Simple, but deep

Multiple actions with a single button go a long way. The jump button, for example, is arguably the most important in the game. One press is a single jump, two presses a double jump. Hold it down longer than a tap and you can jump higher. Hold a direction while jumping and you flip your car in that direction for more momentum (and style). Also use the Rocket Boot while jumping and you can fly through the air and perform aerials. So one button can do many things based on context and situation.

3 Take on feedback

SARPBC came out in 2008 and *Rocket League* in 2015, so we had seven years' worth of community feedback to guide us. We had a dedicated fan-base playing *SARPBC*, which not only gave us great data to use as a starting point, it also proved to us that another game in the series was worth doing in the first place.

4 Don't fear the sofa...

The biggest step is to decide to do local multiplayer in the first place. It's a severely-overlooked feature in today's games, where online multiplayer is almost exclusively the focus.

5 ...but give sofa players something to do

Player options are vital. We allow players to completely customise their vehicle, change their controls, alter their field of view, select multiple team sizes, go offline or online together, and plenty more. The more you allow your players to do, the more that's reflected in their experience.



BACKGROUND CHECK

NAME Jeremy Dunham

JOB TITLE Vice president, Psyonix

BIO Dunham began his career as a writer and editor on IGN's PlayStation 2 channel, before joining Zipper Interactive to work on PS3 shooters *MAG* and *SOCOM 4* (don't hold it against him). He joined Psyonix in 2014, just in time to see it conquer sofas across the land with the mighty *Rocket League*.

6 Crib from the past

Our earliest team members came from Epic, working on the *Unreal Tournament* games, so there was a lot to take from those. Psyonix itself has also worked on games like *Gears of War*, *Nosgoth*, *Bulletstorm*, and *Homefront*, and our individual credits include games like *Evolve*, *SOCOM*, and *Supreme Commander*, so we've had a lot of experience with what works in multiplayer titles.

7 Play your own game

I'd estimate I've spent at least 100-plus hours with *Rocket League* between platforms and various stages of the alpha/beta. These days I play more behind-the-scenes versions than the live version, checking out features we have coming.

8 Keep the community engaged

This is a long-haul game for us and we want to keep updating it with content, modes, and other reasons to come back. It's a time and money investment on our part, but players have made an investment of their own, so it's a pretty fair trade.

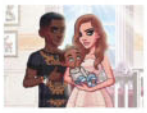
9 Respect your legacy

Because Psyonix worked on *Gears of War*, bringing the Armadillo into the game felt like a full-circle nod to our own evolution as a developer. *Halo* is awesome and we have a lot of fans internally, so it didn't take a lot of discussion to agree on the "HogSticker" for *Rocket League*.

10 Collaboration is key

Microsoft provided us with source models and feedback directly from the creative teams. It took a few months, but by the time we were done everyone was happy, which should make the fans happy too. And really, that's what it's all about. **OXM**

EASTER EGG OXM editor Matthew went to uni with a chap who designed a 50p coin explaining the offside rule to help commemorate the 2012 Olympics.



Kanye West enters games industry?

Kanye is working on a game about his late mum… riding to heaven on a pegasus. Spiritual successor to *Crimson Dragon*, anyone?



Don't forget to close the hatch, or your glub glub gurgle splut…

SUBMARINE FUN

As in "submachine gun," geddit? Whatever, it's Insomniac's new Metroid-alike

After kissing the sky with *Sunset Overdrive*, dev Insomniac Games takes us to the ocean floor in *Song of the Deep*, a 2D adventure styled after the likes of *Castlevania* and *Metroid*, which studio chief creative officer Brian Hastings describes as a "passion project". More like "poisson project", right?

Song of the Deep stars a girl called Merryn, the daughter of a fisherman who is lost at sea. Troubled by a dream of dad disappearing, she scrambles together a submarine from spare parts and embarks on a rescue mission. Like other games in the Metroidvania sub-genre, *Song of the Deep* takes place across a large map that gradually reveals itself as you gain new skills and upgrade your craft: sonar blasts and grappling claws let you manipulate the environment and explore deeper into the abyss; a diving suit gives Merryn a way to leave her craft to squeeze through narrow crevices and flip otherwise unreachable switches and levers – there are a number of puzzles based on water currents and light beams that depend on you doing exactly this. Many of your ship's bolt-ons can be purchased from an enterprising hermit crab, because why not?

//INTERESTINGLY, IT USES UNDERWATER PHYSICS TO CRAFT FRESH PUZZLES//

If this sounds a little twee for *your* hardcore tastes, then know that there's plenty of action, too: thrilling shootouts with shoals of deadly lanternfish (you know, the ones with the teeth) amidst crumbling shipwrecks, and a boss battle with a whale-size sea spider (yes, sea spiders are a thing. Happy swimming!). While it's bold to base an entire Metroidvania game under the sea (water levels are never traditionally the best parts of 2D games), there's some interesting stuff here – particularly in how it uses underwater physics to craft fresh puzzles and obstacles.

Due for a digital release this summer, *Song of the Deep* is a "passion project" because Hastings wanted to create a game with a heroine that his own ten-year-old daughter could look up to. To this end, there's even a tie-in kids' book in the works. More like *Poseidon project*, am I right?

DATAPOINT: NEWS IN NUMBERS

$10 MILLION

Cost of one-off *Dying Light: Spotlight Edition*, which nets you a supporting role in the surely-to-be-excellent tie-in movie.

58

Number of bug fixes outlined in the latest *Fallout 4* patch notes. Them's a lot of fixes.

40

Number of unlockable perks in *Tom Clancy's The Division*. Them's a lot of perks.

DROPPING THE (INFO)BOMB

Fallout 4 DLC gives us robot companions, pet Radscorpions and a trip to Synth Island

What's the story?
Bethesda finally opened its mystery bunker, showing us the first details of its long-awaited *Fallout 4* DLC packs. First in March is the *Automatron* pack. This spreads an army of evil robots across Boston. Why would we pay good money to make the Commonwealth more hostile? Because hunting and harvesting these bad 'bots will let you build your own robot companions.

Why should I care?
Not a droid fan? April's *Wasteland Workshop* might be more your bloodsporting style. It'll let you set cages to capture any living thing foolish enough to peek inside, from Radscorpions and Raiders, to Super Mutants and Deathclaws. You'll be able to tame your new pets, have them battle each other, or even set them on your own settlers. That should keep those layabouts in line.

What happens next?
In May we can look forward to *Far Harbor*, a brand new island to explore. You'll be seeking out a Synth colony, while getting caught in the growing tensions between Synths, Children of Atom and the local townsfolk. But best of all, we'll be visiting the island to solve a mystery with Detective Nick Valentine, who is *by far* the greatest companion. Worth it for the quality time.

FASTER, DEATHCLAW! KILL! KILL!

It looks like *Far Harbor* will be another test of your moral fibre, as you *can* try and bring peace to the island. Sounds nice, though releasing our new pet Deathclaws might be too tempting.

TERMINATOR MEETS WALL-E?

Mods for your DIY robot companion will include different limbs, a choice of voices, armour and weapons, including a new lightning chain gun. We're hoping for a bucket that shoots lightning, with the voice of Michael Caine.

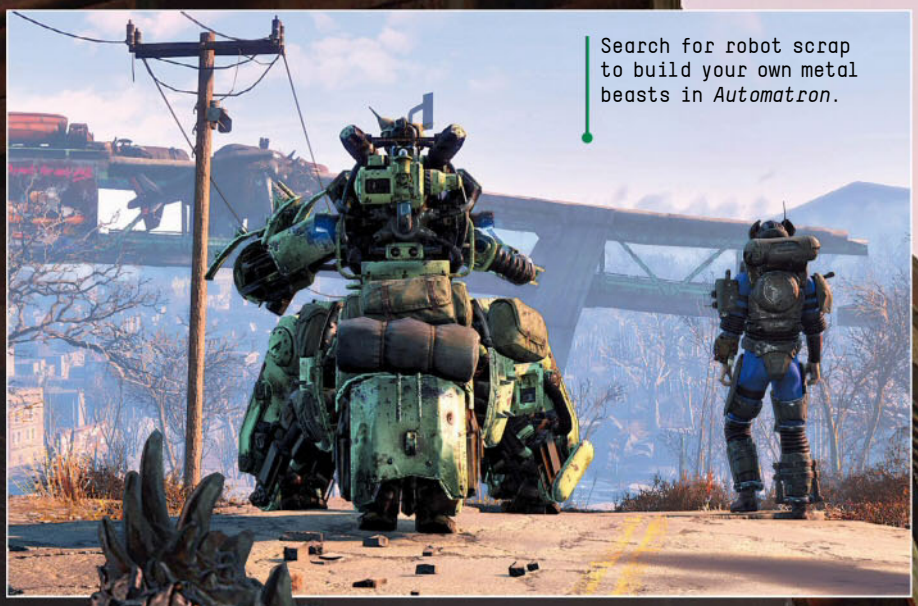
SEASON OF GIVING

Bethesda is expanding its DLC plans, meaning more add-ons are coming. So the Season Pass price has gone up, but early adopters who bought before March will get all incoming DLC for the original price.



Spector returns to System Shock

Warren Spector is now studio director for Otherside, the dev of *System Shock 3*. A welcome comeback for the man behind influential titles such as *Thief*, *Deus Ex* and the original *System Shock*.



Search for robot scrap to build your own metal beasts in *Automatron*.

DEAD-CORATIONS

Is the feng shui of your settlement sorely lacking? *Wasteland Workshop* comes bundled with new design options, including nixie tube lighting, letter kits and taxidermy. Our stuffed Super Mutant has really brightened up the OXM offices.

DID IT *NEED* TO BE BIGGER?

Far Harbor island is the largest explorable area Bethesda has ever created for DLC. Expect more quests, settlements, creatures (a lack of new monsters was one of our faults with the main game), dungeons, armour and weapons.

UPPERS & DOWNERS

This month's temperature, taken

WHAT'S HOT?

1



FAR CRY PRIMAL'S MAMMOTHS

Sadly far too hot, as Ben Griffin kept setting them aflame for his review.

2



RETURN OF THE LEADERBOARD

What's the point of unlocking 'cheevos if we can't rub them in friends' faces?

3



JET PACK

Just Cause 3's DLC finally gives us the ultimate flying toy. We're already flogging our wingsuit on eBay.

WHAT'S NOT?

1



BROKEN DEBUG KITS

A dodgy disc drive meant we had to wait another month to review *Arslan: The Warriors of Legend*.

2



ARSLAN: THE WARRIORS OF LEGEND

This month we did play it. In hindsight, we should've listened to that broken drive.

3



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

He's getting a *live-action* movie. Hope Hollywood isn't inspired by the dreadful human-hedgehog 'romance' in *Sonic '06*.

OPINION

“PRE-ORDERING QUANTUM BREAK ON XBOX ONE GOT YOU A FREE PC COPY? NO WONDER EVERYONE’S FURIOUS”

The backlash to Xbox One exclusives hitting PC isn’t just misguided, it’s harmful



When I flew to Finland and visited Remedy last month, they announced that *Quantum Break* would be coming to Xbox One and Windows PCs. Suddenly, blood began pouring out of the walls, and everyone started screaming with demented rage, tweeting about the death of console gaming and running around the studio starting fires. Maybe the cold Finnish air is clouding my memory a little, but after I’d found a fire extinguisher and put out Sam Lake, I do remember wondering why so many Xbox One owners were getting upset.

People have been complaining online that buying an Xbox One was “pointless” if its exclusives were going to be playable on PC too. Some proudly declared they were cancelling their pre-orders. For others, even that wasn’t enough. They took to Twitter to tell Phil Spencer they were cancelling. They wanted to send Microsoft a clear message about how angry they were at this betrayal of the Xbox brand.

I just don’t see how this isn’t anything but good news for Xbox One. Remedy hasn’t announced a definitive, superior PC version, as *Quantum Break* has been built from the ground up for Xbox One, possibly more so than any other game. The PC version will have cross-save support, so if you smash your computer in a fit of rage after they announce *Gears 4* on PC, you can continue playing *Break* on Xbox One. Baulking at the idea of buying two copies just for that? Well, if you pre-order *Quantum Break* on Xbox One, you get the PC version completely free.

You probably couldn’t think of a better way of executing a simultaneous PC release, while making sure Xbox One owners don’t miss out. Whining about an Xbox One title also being available to PC gamers is ridiculous because we *all still get the games*. It just means more people get to enjoy them. The more people playing first-party exclusives, the more money in the first-party coffers to produce further exclusives. No one loses in this situation.



It’s not like this is suddenly a PS4 exclusive. That might be an actual cause to riot.

Never mind that we’ve been poaching PC exclusives for years now. Never mind that through Windows 10 streaming, the bond between our chosen console and Xbox One has never been stronger. In fact, I’ve seen no backlash to the features reminiscent of PC Gaming we’ve seen creeping into Xbox One in the last year. Already we have access to a small but solid Early Access library. We’re going to be getting mod support in *Fallout 4*, and hopefully more games to come. Developers often re-release old titles on PCs, something we now see monthly thanks to Backwards Compatibility. Games the PC Master Race used to lord over us, such as *DayZ*, are coming to a home console. That would’ve been unthinkable a couple of years ago.



Seen the petition to stop *DayZ* coming to Xbox One? Maybe we shouldn’t tempt fate.

The Xbox One is absolutely a better console for having all these features. And what if the tables were turned and PC developers were to cancel Xbox ports out of fear of ‘betraying’ some imagined irate gamer?

This year we’re getting Xbox One ports of once-PC exclusives like *Warhammer 40,000: Eternal Crusade*, *Prison Architect* and *Who Cares So Long As It’s Not Knack 2*. But if PC gamers threw tantrums when one of their games came to console, publishers would think twice about porting them to Xbox One. That would mean fewer games, and that’s never a good thing, especially if we start losing out on some of the excellent PC ports coming to the console.

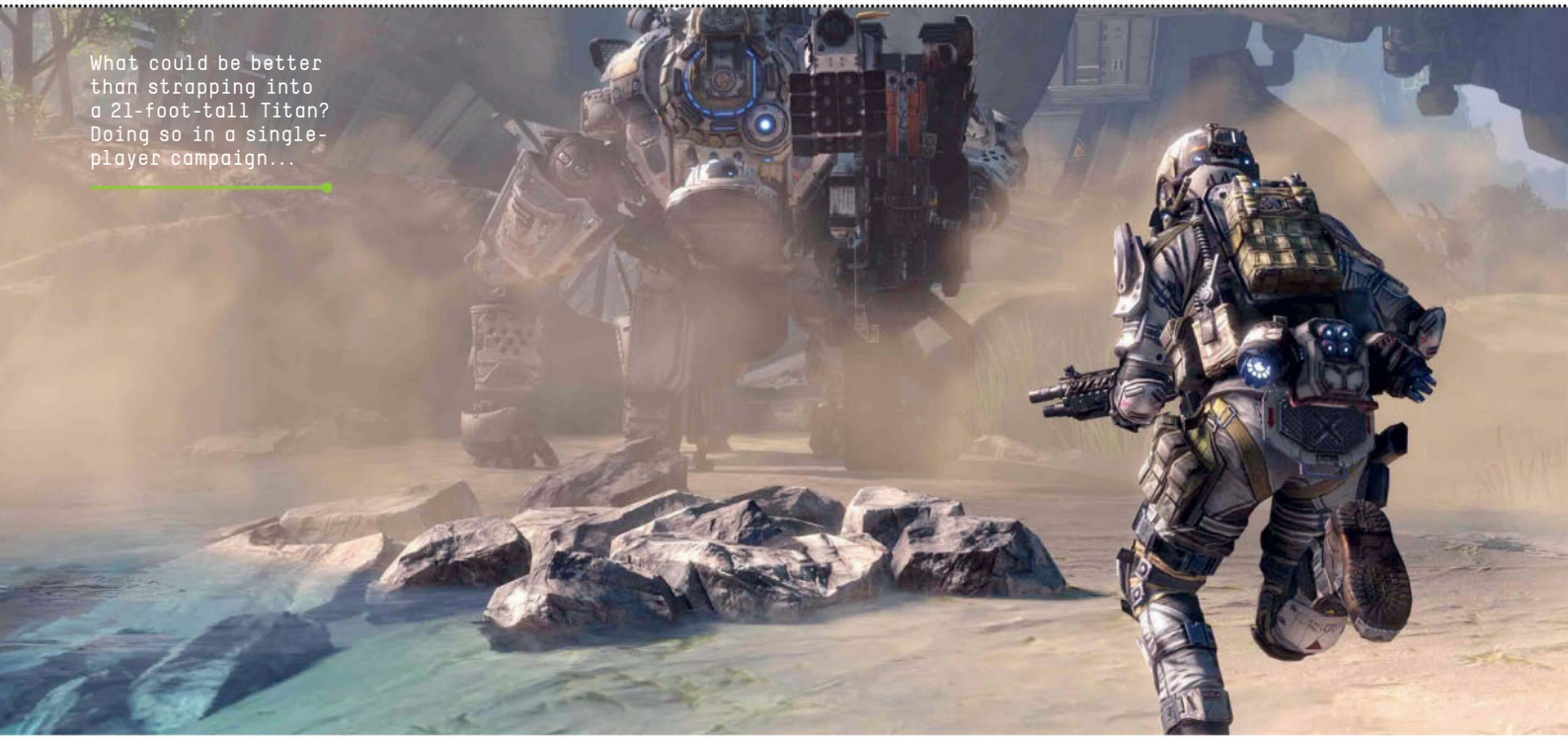
In a gaming scene where the gap between what PCs and consoles are capable of has never been narrower, let’s stop pretending supporting both systems is mutually exclusive. Rise above format wars and celebrate more games being made available to more people. Unless the exclusive is *The Order: 1886*, obviously.

NEXT MONTH Tom tries to get over his face never being this big in OXM again. Truly the end of a golden era.

//WHINING ABOUT AN XBOX ONE TITLE ALSO BEING AVAILABLE TO PC GAMERS IS RIDICULOUS BECAUSE WE *ALL STILL GET THE GAMES*//



Red Dead backwards compatible...
...just for a few hours, thanks to a glitch that allowed premature playing of backwards compatible games undergoing quality testing.



What could be better than strapping into a 21-foot-tall Titan? Doing so in a single-player campaign...

FRESH TITANFALL 2 DETAILS DROP

Lead writer outlines "grounded, dirty" story

Titanfall's servers might be gathering rust these days, but Respawn Entertainment's sci-fi shooter has left its mark on Xbox One history. Bundled with the machine as a console exclusive, it helped kickstart the Xbox One's sales figures – and the marriage apparently didn't do Respawn's coffers much harm either. With over ten million unique users having strapped themselves into a Titan since March 2014, the Californian studio now has the financial heft to do the things with *Titanfall 2* that, as a start-up, it simply couldn't do with the original.

That includes – yes! – a single-player campaign. Speaking to Forbes, *Titanfall 2*'s lead writer Jesse Stern (whose writing credits include *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Battlefield 4*) explains that the upcoming sequel – which is due by the end of March 2017 – will take us to a world where science and magic intermingle, with a tone Stern describes as "grounded, dirty, human and real."

Going into more detail on *Titanfall 2*'s central themes, Stern likens the plot to a retelling of the American Revolution and Civil War – but in space. "We imagined the next generation of immigrants moving out to the new frontier of an inhabitable planet," says Stern. "Rather than taking a traditional sci-fi approach to that, we wanted to look at how that would happen practically, what the ships would look like and, with machines that were designed for excavation and construction, demolition and working the land, what happens when they are turned into instruments of war."

Stern also revealed that there's a *Titanfall* spin-off TV series in the works, if you're into that kind of thing. It's been worked on in conjunction with Canadian outfit Lionsgate Television, whose current productions include *Orange Is The New Black* and past ones *Mad Men* and *Anger Management*. The next 12 months are looking to be a busy ones for EA, with *Mass Effect: Andromeda* and a new, untitled *Battlefield* on the horizon.

//IT TAKES US TO A WORLD WHERE SCIENCE AND MAGIC INTERMINGLE//

EASTER EGG Lionsgate TV's name refers to the Lion's Gate bridge, a striking suspension bridge in Vancouver.

YOU'RE FIRED! > QUOTES OF THE MONTH > BLAH BLAH > HE SAID WHAT? > YADDA

"Goodbye, Dave Mirra, a true pioneer, icon and legend."

Tony Hawk on fellow 2000s extreme sports game star Mirra, who has died aged 41, apparently taking his own life.

"All I can do for now is reassure fans that conversations are happening at high levels."

Capcom's Yoshinori Ono on the future of long-dormant hack 'n' slash series *Onimusha*.

"Unreal. You know. I find myself in awe just looking at it, like, 'Oh my God that looks just like me'."

Carolina Panthers quarterback Cam Newton on seeing himself in the game for the first time.

FORMULA WON



A 21st century take on the Senna/Prost rivalry.

FORMULA WHATNOW?
Formula E is a new racing series designed to be more environmentally friendly than Formula One. It started in 2014, and the cars can reach 140mph. The drivers have to change cars halfway through each race.

EXTREME (E) SPORTS
If you want to feel like your heart is about to beat out of your chest and onto the floor, eSports is a great way to do it. *Forza* isn't the only game available to compete in, so visit www.gfinity.net and choose your game.

FOOT IN MOUTH
Before knowing the full result, we passed Nico after the final and offered a friendly 'well done' after an enjoyable race… but he replied by saying 'I came last'. Oops. Well this is awkward.

SENNA VS PROST… VS OXM

A classic racing rivalry revs up next to us on Forza 6's startline

The names Senna and Prost evoke memories of arguably the greatest rivalry in motorsport history. But more than two decades later, Ayrton Senna's nephew, Bruno Senna, and Alain Prost's son, Nico Prost, now race together in Formula E – the world's first electronic-powered racing series. And since Formula E cars are in *Forza 6*, who wouldn't want to see the next generation of those great names rekindle that iconic rivalry, Xbox style?

The venue was the rather impressive Gfinity Arena in London, the UK's only dedicated eSports venue, complete with a live audience and a slick, high budget TV production streamed around the world. No pressure, then. Ever the professionals, Nico and Bruno were taking it all extremely seriously, cramming in some last minute practice on the Long Beach track they already know from the real thing (but taking advantage of the lack of racing stewards, it must be said). Bruno seemed to have the slight edge thanks to his more aggressive style, but Nico was keeping it neater, minimising oversteer. The similarities with their predecessors' driving styles were clear to see.

Nico told us: "The graphics are amazing, the steering wheel is the same as I have [in my real-life racing car] – I'm impressed." We asked Bruno if he had a wheel and pedals set at home, but he said: "I play with the D-pad at home! But it's much easier with the wheel – I can control the oversteer, and catch it. But with the D-pad, I keep just catching, oversteering and going over."

He wasn't alone. The event's rules stated that the controls had to be set to simulation steering, which even the game itself doesn't recommend on a pad. But with only two wheels set up and the rest of the challengers on pads, it made for plenty of crashes from all concerned, and the audience loved it.

We qualified 7th and came 2nd in our semi-final, so it was officially on: Senna vs Prost vs OXM in the grand final. Perhaps unfairly, the track was switched to Rio (reverse), which neither star driver had practiced. So, predictably, they struggled a little. Well, we say 'a little'. Out of eight



Big Daddy stomping to Xbox One?

Following a similar listing on a South African website, a *BioShock* collection has been rated for Xbox One and 360. No confirmation yet, but all three games are coming to Backwards Compatibility.

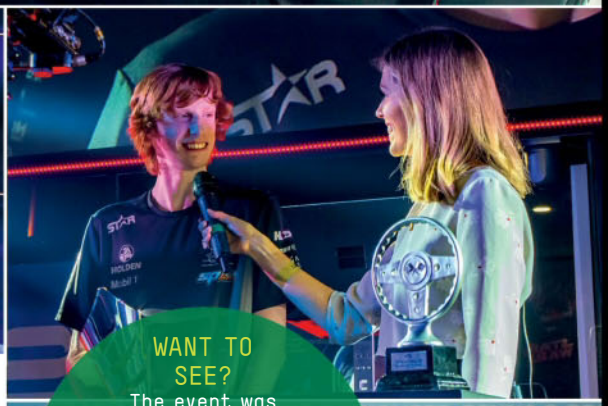


TO GFINITY... AND BEYOND
The venue streams its coverage like a TV show, with commentators, a presenter, live interviews, face cams and, of course, full-screen streaming. Check out what's on now at gfinity.net/live-tv

XBOXING CLEVER
Both drivers were given an Xbox One to practice on for a week before the event, but Nico's came with the wrong plug, meaning he couldn't play it. Bruno used his for *Forza*, but also Netflix.

We may not have come first, but we did beat Senna *and* Prost. Career change, perhaps?





WANT TO SEE?
The event was recorded in full and is available to view on Formula E's official YouTube channel at bit.ly/1Qtt8g6. But you can skip the bit where we crashed out of 3rd place on the final lap. Ahem.



Zak took the trophy this time, but next year it will be ours. Oh yes. It will be ours.

cars, they finished 7th and 8th. Bruno said afterwards, "I think this is the first time I've finished a race without finishing the race. I got timed out, so... it's not ideal."

While we finished a respectable 5th, the trophy was collected by deserved winner Zak Scholes who, by his own admission, "plays a lot of *Forza*". He told us: "I feel great! To beat Senna, Prost... two people I'd probably never beat in a car. But there you go." Nice work, Zak.

The day concluded with the showdown everyone had come to see: Senna vs Prost, one on one. Despite getting a bit lost in the streets of Prague, Bruno claimed victory in both races. He even stopped before the line so he could wait until the last moment to win. Careful, Bruno. Feuds have started from far less...

HOW TO SPEAK DEVELOPER

Your guide to translating those interview gems

"We think players are going to be really excited about the changes for the Xbox One version."
We're particularly excited about the change in price.

"Thanks to our inspired use of randomly generated levels, this game could potentially go on forever!"
Ironic, as thanks to randomly generated levels, we spent about half an hour developing it.

"We're continuing to develop exclusively for SmartGlass. Once SmartGlass gets its killer app, consumers will realise just how wrong they were!"
Well either you or us has to show some self-awareness soon, and trust me – it's never going to be us.

"The trick to being a successful developer is having a sense of humour about ourselves."
We just got wind of this column, and are suing OXM into their pauper graves.



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PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS / **DEVELOPER** EA DICE / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **ETA** 26 MAY

MIRROR'S EDGE CATALYST

Faith learns the free-running ropes, as a prequel learns from its past

A prequel? So we see Faith as she parkours around a jungle gym?
Not quite. Faith has recently left prison, and seems to have some anger issues. She's a far more reckless person at this point in her life than the character we met in *Mirror's Edge*. Her parents' murder is still very recent, but what could be more therapeutic than diving off a building? Oh, and then landing safely. Preferably.

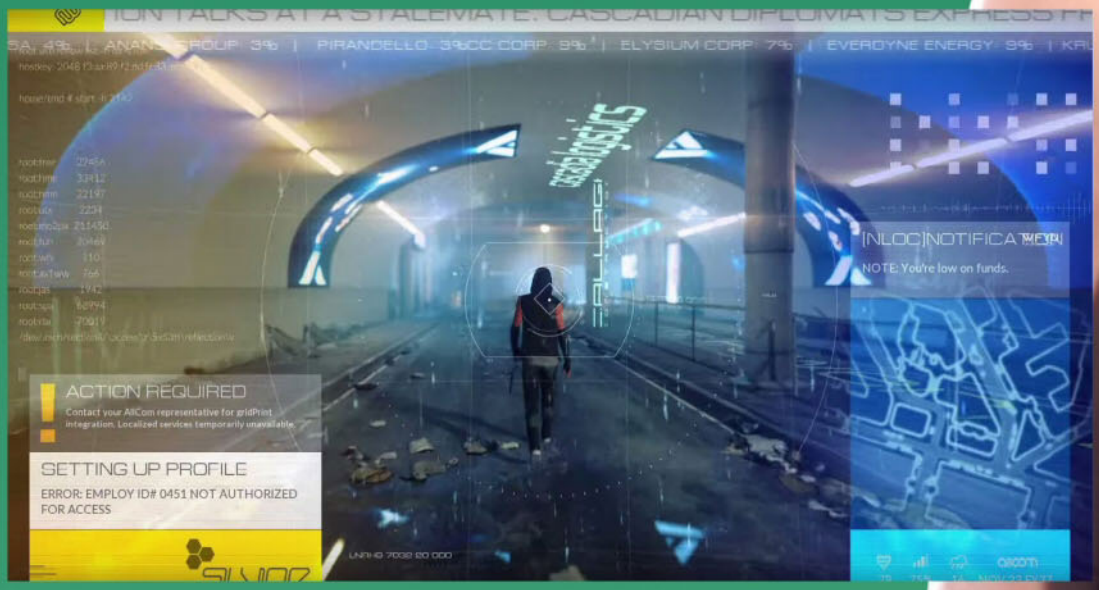
Ooh, can I leap around the city now?
If you can stomach it. One view from atop a building was so high, it made your average *Assassin's Creed* viewpoint look like a diving board above the shallow end of the kiddy pool. Fall off the edge, and you could probably complete the original *Mirror's Edge* in the time it takes to hit the bottom. Don't look down.

Sounds great, but do I have to use a gun again?
The rubbish shooting is long gone. Fighting is brutal and efficient, with quick finishers to keep the focus on the free-running. Leaping and landing on a guard with a kick to the skull reminds us of *Bioshock Infinite*'s excellent skyhook combat. We also saw Faith hanging on to helicopter drones to get around. The higher up you are, the easier it is to get the drop on guards.

First-person will make running headfirst into walls so immersive!
Sure will, but we're keen to see what improvements have been made to the controls, as the first-person view did make it tricky to judge jumps before. There is one new tool that could potentially help: it looks like Faith has access to a visor this time. It shows her a tickertape of news stories, a mini-map and a body scanner.

But prequels are always duller. Apart from my favourite movie, *The Phantom Menace*.
...Right. *Catalyst* actually looks to be pushing Xbox One to the limits, with a sleek, detailed, highly believable future city. One explosive set-piece shows Faith dangling from the crumbling debris of a building in scenes that would make Lara Croft tear up with pride. If *Mirror's Edge* was a great near-miss, *Catalyst* looks well on track to stick the landing this time out.

UPDATE







EA has certainly put a lot of *faith* in this one. Oh, it's tough being this hilarious.



UPDATE

Use your zombie tentacles to fling your foes. Wait, zombies have tentacles now?

PUBLISHER ZOINK GAMES / **DEVELOPER** ZOINK GAMES / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **ETA** TBA

ZOMBIE VIKINGS

Stellar hack and slash, or a hack that deserves to be slashed?

Zombies? Again?
No, not your usual restless undead. These zombies are the good guys, see? This retains the love-it-or-get-it-the-hell-away-from-me art style of Zoink Games' last game, *Stick it to the Man*. But it's a more action-orientated adventure, where 1-4 players hack and slash through levels together, *Castle Crashers* style.

To eat the brains of hapless townsfolk? I won't do it!
Actually your MO is far sillier. Odin's eye has been stolen, and you have to get it back. You'll battle through areas like gingerbread swamps and the intestines of a giant snake. *Zombie Vikings* boasts over 40 sword types, and new characters included for Xbox One. Raz of *Psychonauts* fame even appears as the Raz-ombie (their "joke", not ours).

Anything else new for Xbox One?
Raybjorn and Frostbjorn characters, another five versus levels and a behind-the-scenes making-of video. There'll also be Xbox One-specific features like Hero Stats, which lets you compare your progress with friends, and all the extras that have been released in updates for other platforms.

Compare progress with friends? Do I even want 'em knowing I played this?
Castle Crashers is still great fun on Xbox One, and this looks to have enough clever ideas to make it a worthy co-op hack and slasher. Zombies get unique powers, like exploding muscles and grabby tentacles, and all the brain-eating you could want. If *Zombie Vikings*' odd sense of humour is for you, it could be a multiplayer favourite.



Will the making-of vid include the brainstorming session where they came up with this title?



Nothing says "Actually, think I'll stay in a hotel instead" quite like human remains decorating the floor.

PUBLISHER GRIP GAMES / **DEV** TEOTL STUDIOS / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **ETA** NOW (EARLY ACCESS), MAY (FULL RELEASE)

THE SOLUS PROJECT

Just *once*, it'd be nice to visit a planet that wasn't trying to kill us...

Is this another walking simula-?
Watch the language, buddy. *The Solus Project* is a survival game that's also about discovery. Marooned on a hostile planet, you can explore the mysteries on the surface or investigate more linear secrets underground. Hopefully that'll give this more structure than most open world games.

So I can enjoy skipping about the planet?
Skip carefully, because it's described as "hostile" for a reason. Lightning storms, complete with massive twisters, are common, and the smallest changes in weather can have a big impact. Nights are bone-chillingly cold, days sweat-drenchingly hot. Even little factors like cloud coverage are vital to staying ahead and adapting to the planet's living conditions.

So it's a weather sim?
You carry a device that tells you your health, temperature, hydration, etc. You'll have to gather resources to craft tools needed to survive. But if you stay in the same place for too long, you're playing it wrong. *Solus* encourages you to explore and seek new resources rather than repetitively relying on the same ones over and over.

I hate survival games, BTW. Sorry, should've mentioned that earlier.
That might not be a problem: difficulty can be set to make it a hardcore survival challenge or an easily ignored extra so you can focus on exploring. The planet has a past, with alien structures ripe to be investigated. We're also promised at least 150 secrets to unearth.

But is it worth exploring? Technically a retirement home is full of "secrets".
Yeah, don't explore those. The world is entirely hand-crafted, with thousands of unique models to ensure there's always something new to find. We've seen flaming meteor showers, rocks coated in alien plant-life, and dark descents into winding tombs – one of which leads to a magnificent temple sculpted into the rock. Too many open world games confuse "secrets" with "100 feathers to collect". Having to keep track of our survival makes sense - it *should* be hard to explore a hostile world. If *The Solus Project* keeps up the secrets and the wondrous sights, it'll be even harder to leave.



Is that an egg? Let's eat it now, and worry if it's safe later. Survival's soooo easy...



Beyond "marooned on a planet," we have no plot details. You'll have to go see for yourself.

XBOX TO-DO LIST

SAVE THE DATES

THE GUIDE

We'd have included, 'Don't eat your weight in Easter eggs,' but we don't want to be sued for hypocrisy



5TH APRIL

01 MAKE TIME FOR THIS

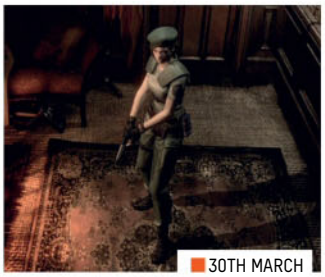
Time is more fractured and broken than Aidan Gillen's American accent in *Quantum Break*, a third-person shooter in which the narrative plays out both in-game and via live-action TV. Come for the usual excellent Remedy storytelling and atmosphere, stay for the TV sho... Actually, stay for the amazing time powers that make third-person gunplay feel fresh again.



25TH MARCH

02 REPLAY BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

Not that you need an excuse, but what better way to celebrate the release of *Batman vs Superman*? Well, apart from going to see it.



30TH MARCH

03 FEAR GETTING OLD

Celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Resident Evil* with the excellent remake. Or visit a zombie-infested mansion and watch your friends perish horribly.



5TH APRIL

04 SPEED RESPONSIBLY...

...all the way to the shops and buy *Dirt Rally*. Note: we're not legally responsible for the wonderful advice we give you in this magazine.



22ND APRIL

05 OF COURSE-A YOU WANT IT

Assetto Corsa accelerates onto Xbox One, determined to cross the line before *Dirt Rally*... which came out 17 days ago. Still, no shame in second place.



24TH APRIL

06 REGRET READING A BOOK...

...as season six of *Game of Thrones* overtakes George RR Martin's novels. Hopefully it'll make it easier to avoid spoilers because *it bloody better had*.



3RD MAY

07 MO PLAYERS MO PROBLEMS?

Find out if *Battleborn*'s attempt to balance 25 characters is colourful chaos (the fun kind) or colourful chaos (the more common unplayable kind).



20TH MAY

08 THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED

Unless you buy *Homefront: The Revolution* and play it on an Xbox One hooked up to your TV. Bet Gil Scott-Heron feels stupid now.



26TH MAY

09 TAKE A LEAP OF FAITH

Actually, we reckon we can think of more daring risks than buying prequel *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst*. Hmm, maybe try completing it blindfolded?

Messages

Love letters, death threats, and some stuff about games... Your comments on the mag and on Xbox

OXM, 5 Pinesway Industrial Estate, Ivo Peters Road, Bath

CONTACT US facebook.com/oxmuk @oxm oxm@futurenet.com gamesradar.com/oxm

The start of the year is pretty slow for big releases, but we're worried you're all about to quit gaming altogether. Either the graphics aren't good enough, you've adopted a crazy gameplay rationing system, or you want to *pay for there to be fewer games*. Keep on like this, and by the time we get our hands on *Quantum Break* and *Gears 4* you'll be buying *Official Knitwear Magazine*.



Star Letter

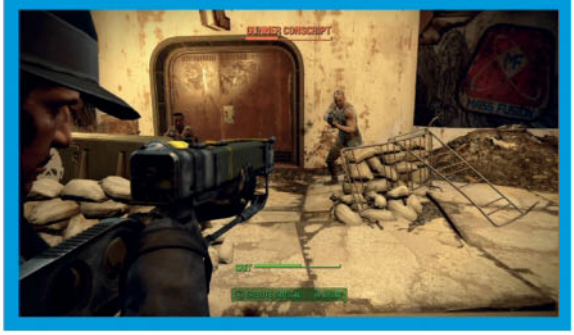
Prize: This War Of Mine
The best piece of correspondence wins a game from Matthew's goody bag



DON'T WASTE THE WASTELAND

I've invested 400+ hours in both *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas*. I don't expect to invest less in *Fallout 4*. So I'm allowing myself only one Achievement per month. In November I got my first in the Vault. In December I could finally open the hatch to the Commonwealth. Come January I finally started exploring. With 50 Achievements to go, I should stretch playing *Fallout 4* for the next six years. Just in time for *Fallout 5*.
Robin Kuipers

We'd say that managing to stop playing *Fallout 4* is an achievement in itself. Come on, Robin, wasn't the five year wait after *New Vegas* enough?



They belong in a museum

Why are so many new games going for the old, antiquated look, like *Hue* and *Albert and Otto*? Are people really enjoying the older, less detailed imagery that these types of games are re-introducing? *Sheltered* looks like the NES games I grew up with! How is this even remotely attractive looking? There is a reason next-gen gaming systems keep evolving: because of the technological advances in graphics. Not to endlessly relive old classics!
Jon House

When you're making your first game you'll be lucky to have a budget of 27p, so sometimes cutting-edge graphics aren't an option. Besides, anyone who doesn't think *Kalimba* looks just as beautiful as *Halo 5* doesn't deserve to have eyes.

Kickstopper

I'm sick to death of Kickstarter constantly asking me to fund self-indulgent games that seem to think concepts like "fun" and "meeting concrete release dates" are for AAA sell outs. When I saw *Yooka-Laylee*, I would have happily paid a fiver NOT to play it. How about an anti-Kickstarter that lets us do that? If we successfully raise the money the dev is looking for, they can have it, so long as they sign a contract legally binding them to never making the game. If they break that contract, they feel the punishing wrath of my kicks.
Richard Arendt

Okay, yes, some Kickstarted games turn out disappointing. But spending money for there to be fewer games in the world? Sorry, Richard, but we're going to have to Kickstart a campaign to have you banned from the internet.

Feel the love

I have not played a videogame since I was a kid with an Atari 2600. My boyfriend decided to buy me an Xbox One for Christmas, but I saw through his little charade and decided I would keep it all to myself and bar him from playing with it at all unless he showered me with gifts and cuddles, or flat out lent me his credit card. Now I need to get stuck into some games. Could you recommend some hot new titles?
Angela Reveco

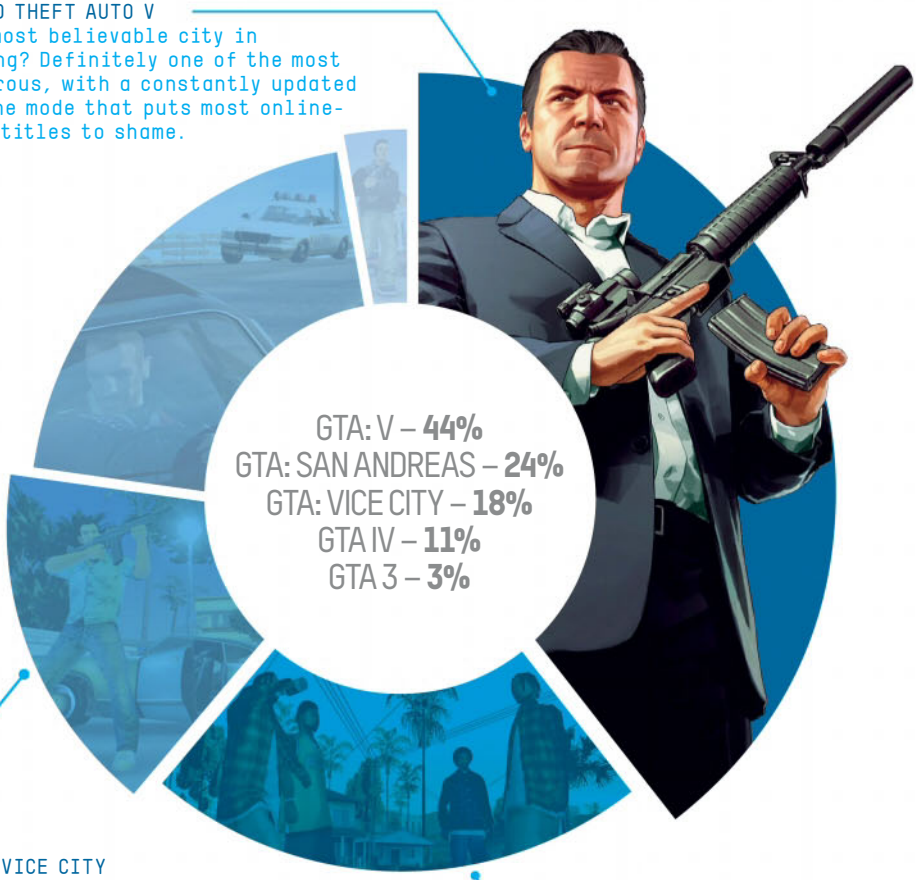
Lovers in a Dangerous Space Time sounds like the perfect game for you two.

To Cheat or not to Cheat?

There's only one worse feeling than cheating in a game, and that's when you cheat, only to realise that the solution was really obvious and you're a moron. But what keeps me googling game solutions is that for every obvious solution, there's an obnoxious impossi-puzzle that I never would have got in a million years. How about a website or magazine that lets you cheat but warns you how stupid you'll feel for cheating?
Peter Brunell

Chi... tang? Us pros are unfamiliar with this concept. Shame on you, Pete.

YOUR VOTE | WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE GRAND THEFT AUTO ON XBOX?



GRAND THEFT AUTO V
The most believable city in gaming? Definitely one of the most generous, with a constantly updated online mode that puts most online-only titles to shame.

GTA: VICE CITY
Its city feels tiny these days, but GTA's soundtrack was never better. Billie Jean is still our favourite tune to run over pedestrians to.

GTA: SAN ANDREAS
IV may have taken itself too seriously, but blame *San Andreas*. A grounded story of inner-city life that descends into jetpack fuelled nonsense.

The Annotated... **Arbiter in Killer Instinct**

Your thoughts on the latest contender to join Rare's fighting game



Hot topic

What's the one game you could never trade-in for cold, hard cash?


My *Halo* collection is far too precious to me. So many memories. – **Romman Ahmed**


Far Cry 4, even though I lost 35 hours of gameplay when my HDD broke. I can't bring myself to start a new game. Anyone who has played it knows what 44% of the game lost would feel like. – **Daniel Harvey**


Halo 3. First game I bought on my own, first game I had Xbox Live on, first time I had friends come over to my house to play exclusively on my console for a single game. Lots of memories on that disc. – **Lance Levi Pritt**


I'll never trade *Skyrim* in *patiently waits for backwards compatibility* – **Acacia Lelania**


Halo 3. *Halo* is my life! – **Jessica Rilling**


I would never trade in *Destiny* as it serves as a constant reminder not to buy into a terrible game based purely on the studio's previous accomplishments. – **Scot Mackay**


The Witcher 3, no doubt! – **César da Silva**


Dark Souls. I will go to the grave with this game. – **Mikey Ellis**


I would never trade in *Dying Light*. Love it, and the DLC has made it even better. – **Paul Cook**


Walking Dead: Survival Instinct. I don't care what anyone says about it, it's my favourite game of all time. (*That sentence is scarier than anything in* Survival Instinct – Ed) – **Brad Blackler**


Batman: Rise of Sin Tzu, because no one will take it. – **Joshua Blackwood**

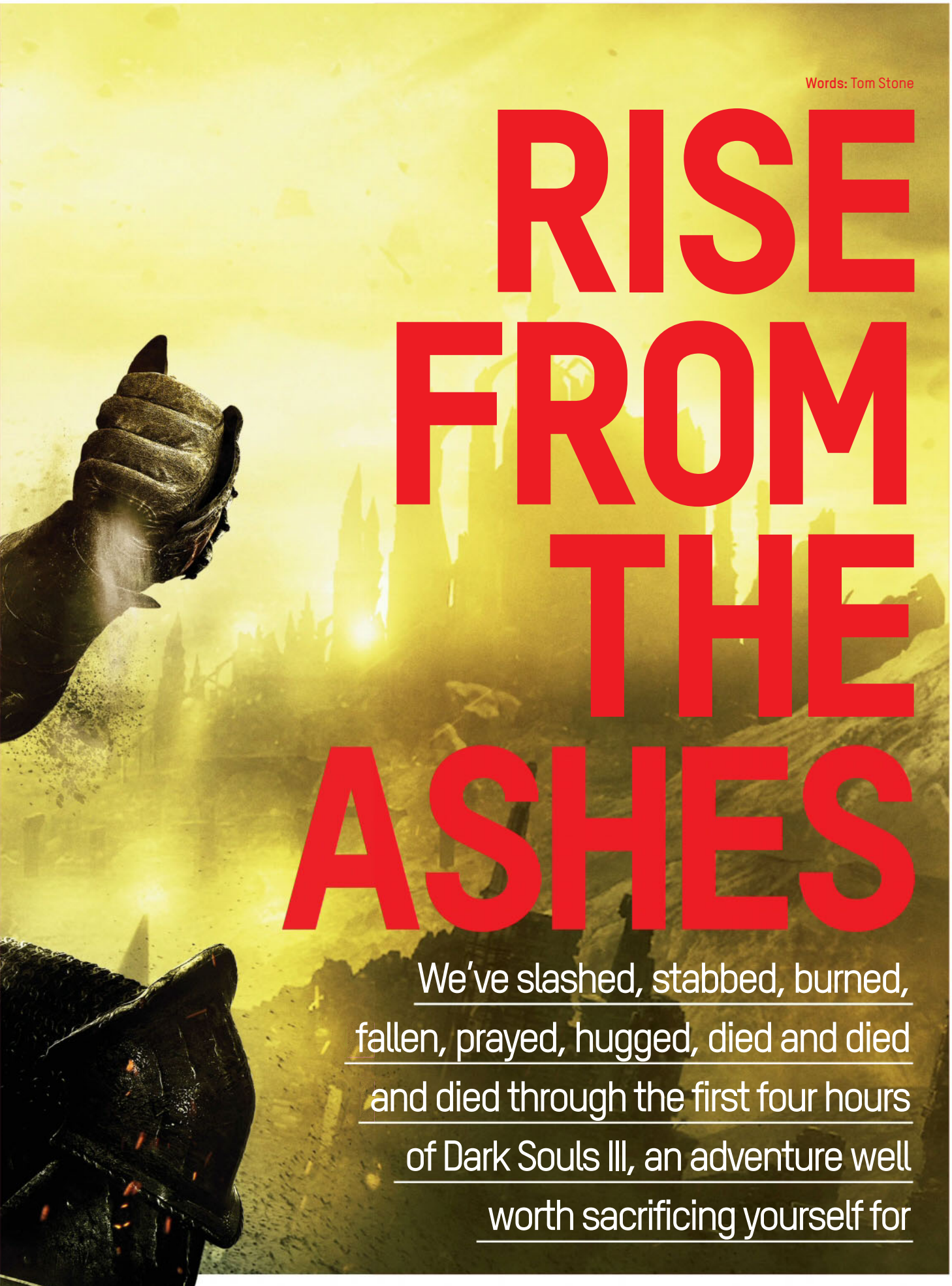


XBOX EXCLUSIVE 2015


"CINEMATIC THRILL-RIDE"
Telegraph
"I ENJOYED EVERY ROLLICKING, BIG-HEARTED SECOND OF IT"
IGN
"ONE OF THE BEST ACTION ADVENTURES OF THE YEAR"
Metro
"MORE THOUGHTFUL AND REPLAYABLE"
Kotaku
"LARA CROFT IS EPIC"
Daily Star
"VISUALLY STUNNING"
Daily Star
"EVERYTHING I WANT A VIDEO GAME TO BE"
Videogamer.com
"SINGLE-PLAYER PERFECTION"
Pocket Lint
"ROLLICKING, GORGEOUS AND CONFIDENT"
Telegraph
"THE PERFECT ACCOMPANIMENT TO THE SHINY XBOX ONE"
Metro
RISE OF THE
TOMB RAIDER
DISCOVER THE LEGEND WITHIN
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XBOX EXCLUSIVE 2015



Your flesh being aflame? That's actually good for you this time. The 863 stabbings we took during this preview? Not so much.



Words: Tom Stone

RISE FROM THE ASHES

We've slashed, stabbed, burned, fallen, prayed, hugged, died and died and died through the first four hours of Dark Souls III, an adventure well worth sacrificing yourself for

The original *Dark Souls* was a huge disappointment. A classic, sure, but also a liar, with an opening cinematic so misleading it might as well have been for a different game. Remember the level where Gwyn threw lightning bolts at a sky full of dragons? Or the bit where witches spun devastating firestorms across the lands? Come now, surely you remember when a blood-soaked dragon, Seath the Scaleless, screamed atop a pile of its dead brethren – who could forget something like that?

Well, it seems the developers could, when they realised what last-gen tech could actually handle. Pulling off those epic scenes on an Xbox 360 would've been impossible – the equivalent of running *Halo 5* on a calculator. Anyone who endured *Dark Souls*' chugging framerate will know this was always a series too ambitious for its time and console. But now we're on Xbox One, a machine that can finally deliver on the mad ambitions of From Software.

Unfamiliar with the series? Don't worry, *Dark Souls III* treats newcomers and veterans in exactly the same way: it hates you all. You pick from a series of classes (we opted for a knight with high combat skills, but there are spellcasting mages, or just a loincloth if you love a challenge or hate yourself). Then begins 30+ hours of action-RPG that kills you every chance it gets. It only gets away with being such a spiteful jerk of an adventure because of its perfect combat, constant sense of discovery, unmatchable satisfaction – not to mention that a promised end is finally in sight. Returning *Dark Souls 1* and *Bloodborne* director Hidetaka Miyazaki calls this a "turning point" for *Souls*, a trilogy ending on the console it should've been on in the first place.

Where more fitting to end than the grave? A bell tolls, as we begin our final journey by literally crawling out of the dirt. This is the Cemetery of Ash, a winding path of gravestones and Hollows – ghoulish, zombie-esque enemies – already trying to stab you back into the ground. We're fresh off *DSII*'s *Scholar of the First Sin* port and the basic rules of combat seem to apply here. Lock on to enemies, keep your shield raised and only attack when you have the perfect opportunity.

A quick death

What we're not prepared for is the speed, with both us and our undead foes moving far more swiftly than before. There's actually an advantage here: enemies are so quick to leap for us that an evasive dodge-roll out of the way leaves their spines exposed and ready for a deadly backstab. But naturally, when it all goes wrong, death comes faster than ever. The enemies' insistent combos leave us sliced to ribbons before we even have a chance of getting our shield back up. We could barely afford mistakes in *Souls II*, but now they cost us so much more.

Proving that shades of grey can look visually dynamic if you know how to use them, *Souls III* looks magnificent in the bleakest way possible. A major step forwards from the bland woodlands of *II* and dull textures of the original, *Souls III* impresses straight off with a detailed, dark forest, littered with ruined gravestones and draped in fog straight out of *Silent Hill*. Miyazaki's always been influenced by Gothic literature, and here he's trapped us in a forest torn from the darkest fairy tales.

It's soon followed by a faraway view of snow-covered mountaintops, worthy of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*'s opening. But we're not going to be tumbling down them in an avalanche of QTEs. Far likelier we'll be hitting those peaks – if this follows the design principles of the original, then *Souls III* wouldn't show you a far-off land without the promise of exploring it later. Now it's residing on a console that can actually handle draw distance without sounding like it's about to explode, those promises have never been more tantalising.



Check out Mr 'I'm Too Good To Use Both Shield Straps' over here. Waste this fool.

SOFTLY, GENTLY...

THE ART OF KILLING

Magic? Mana? How blue you're feeling? Exactly what *Dark Souls III*'s new blue energy bar contains is hard to define, as it's not just drained by spellcasting. The bar also powers new Weapon Arts – powerful moves unique to each weapon you find. Use a two-handed weapon and you'll be able to indulge in deadly spinning strikes or an incredibly powerful rushing attack. We'd have kept playing our demo with a two-handed weapon, but if we tried to preview *Dark Souls III* without a shield, this would be 3,000 words describing the 'YOU DIED' screen. And we're saving that gold for the review.



Archery puts some welcome distance between you and your enemy.



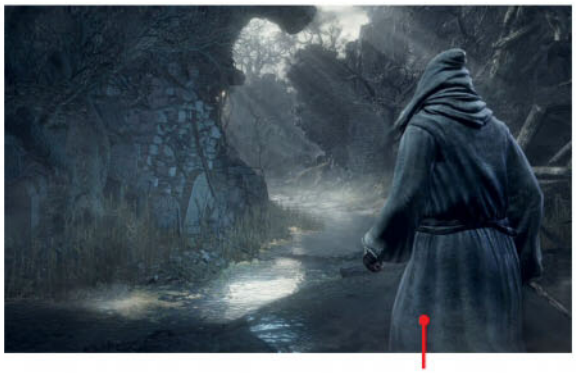
"SLICED TO RIBBONS BEFORE WE'D EVEN RAISED OUR SHIELD"



Good luck reaching those distant lands, mind, as barely ten minutes in, we're already approaching the first boss fight. This is Ludex Gundyr, a knight on bended knee, frozen in place. We take tentative steps forward, and are prompted to pull a sword free from his stomach. We're not so naïve that we think this will go well for us, nor have we failed to notice a shimmering, oily, oozing *something* on the knight's back. But what choice do we have?

We rip out the coiled sword, and Gundyr immediately moves to slaughter the thief stupid enough to disturb him. We dodge roll, sticking to backstabs and quick hits. Gundyr's powerful, but his ranging spear attack just begs to be rolled under, exposing his glaring weakness. We fought knights just like this hundreds of times in *Scholar of the First Sin*, so we know what we're doing. Not to brag, but we soon whittle his health bar down to a third. Try not to drop your magazine while you applaud.

But! Ego has no home here. We'd forgotten about that gooey spider on Gundyr's back, but it certainly hadn't forgotten us. It pours from the knight's spine and, consuming him, becomes a twisted monstrosity several times his size. The game's first horrific surprise is enough to shock us into lowering our shield. The creature celebrates by growing even bigger, oozing forwards as we stumble back. Suddenly the tables have been turned, then smashed over our head for good measure. An over-reliance on armoured knights in *Dark Souls II* lacked the creative streak of the original's stellar boss fights, and Ludex Gundyr's twisted fate feels like a direct response to that criticism.



This outfit is going to do nothing for your protection. Like going to war in PJs.

Boss rush

"Then touch the darkness within me. Take nourishment from these sovereign-less souls." So says the



Ludex Gundyr, pre-transformation. A familiar challenge for anyone who bested *Dark Souls II*.

CINDER BLOCKS

YOU ARE NO ONE

Our initial quest is to hunt down the legendary Lords of Cinder, but we're no 'Chosen Undead'. This time we're not nearly so special, referred to as a "nameless, accursed undead, unfit even to be cinder". 'Chosen One' narratives are pretty open and shut (and tired and overdone), so could this mean we're not destined to save Lothric? Maybe only one player will finish *Dark Souls III*, and then everyone else will turn to ash, the game never playable again. That'd be some of the most hateful design we have ever seen from From Software, second only to those archers in Anor Londo.



Bloodstains let you watch the deaths of other players. Laugh at their hilariously doomed attempts, before you immediately fall down a hole.





Ludex Gundyr transforms into purest nightmare fuel. This is when our cockiness took a hike.

Handmaiden of Firelink Shrine, the game's main hub. She levels you up in return for souls, much more helpful than the Shrine's other occupants. "We're not fit to lick their boots," laments one, speaking of the Lords of Cinder – the fiends you're tasked with hunting down. Another thinks it's a cruel joke to even bother trying. Real life of the party, this lot. Ludleth of Courland is our favourite, a pipsqueak who claims to be a Lord of Cinder himself. "I may be but small, but I will die a colossus," he boasts, his feet not even reaching the floor thanks to the grand throne he's sitting on. Maybe this odd fellow is telling us the truth, but we reckon he's madder than Solaire after a good brainworming.

The Shrine's bonfire warps us to The High Wall of Lothric, the area shown in earlier previews. Low-level Hollows share stabbing space with hulking knights, around a castle that constantly alters the rules to keep you feeling unsafe. Enter its ink-black interiors, for example, and you'll need to put away the shield to light the way with a torch. Back outside, a staircase leads to a small army lying in wait, only for them to be burnt to a crisp by a surprise dragon attack (which would've been even more surprising if it wasn't almost exactly the same as a surprise in the original *Dark Souls*). The knights of Lothric's walls pack as much punch as their demented designs promise – one has spiked circular saws where his shoulder blades should be – and their speed makes this feel like playing *Scholar of the First Sin* on fast forward. A familiar challenge, but with different battle rhythms for series veterans to adjust to. A most enticing challenge.

Without a map screen, stellar art direction has always been crucial for the series to help heroes build a mental map. Having explored Lothric briefly last year, we were impressed by how much its walls had seeped into our muscle memory during this return visit. As you slowly build your knowledge of how the ladders, passageways and shortcuts intersect with each other, you learn the smartest route to take. We soon had the time it took to get from the first bonfire to the first boss down to less than a minute, perfect for multiple retries. This is an inevitability with *Souls* bosses; or so we thought...

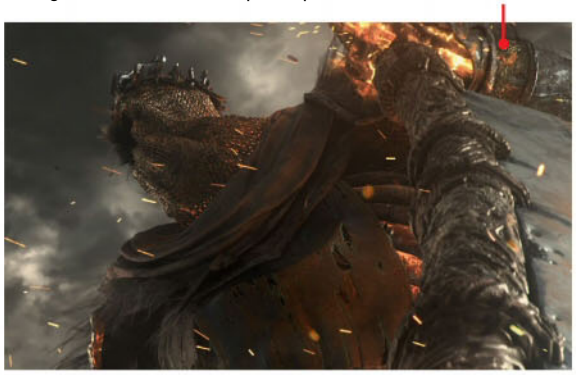
A slog of ice and fire

Vordt of the Boreal Valley is a large armoured ice beast with a temper as short as his health bar is long. He should be terrifying, but it's a classic case of a *Souls* boss having a bark worse than its bite. Its frost attack is nasty, but keeping our shield up and taking advantage of the many attack opportunities means the beast falls surprisingly quickly, and that's without unleashing any flame-based weaponry. Based on the pacing of previous *Souls* games, Vordt is likely meant to be a mini-boss designed to settle heroes in, but it's mildly disappointing how quickly he falls. We had hoped that Miyazaki's watchful eye would spice up a boss game that slightly loosened in *Souls II*.

Our reward for victory? Familiar flying monsters, their hands soaked in disconcerting amounts of blood, snatching us up. They're the Bat Wing Demons that took us to Anor Londo, the first game's city of the gods. This time they abandon us somewhere less grand: the Undead Settlement, a village of crude wooden huts, far from the royalty and riches of Lothric Castle. Wheeled carts lie empty and abandoned. Petrified corpses are everywhere, still kneeling in prayer. Body bags have been strung up from trees, and pitchfork-wielding villagers anticipate our arrival, their ghoulish faces twisted in hate. It's the least welcoming village since *Resident Evil 4*.

The average Hollow peasant lacks the resilience of a Lothric knight, falling after a well-timed spleen poke.

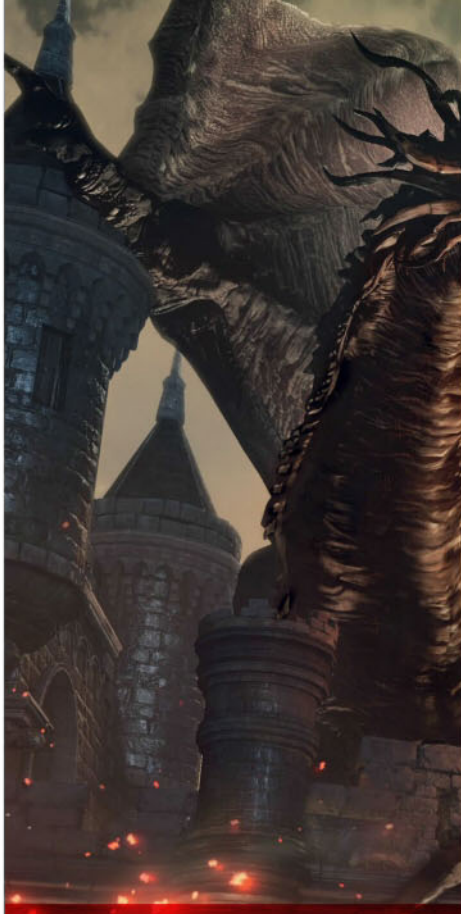
Yhorm the Giant. A battle we anticipate/dread in equal measure.



"BURNT TO A CRISP BY A SURPRISE DRAGON ATTACK"



We can see for miles and miles. Xbox One's draw distance is put to excellent use here.



FIRELINK TO THE PAST

A GIANT LEAP BACKWARDS?

Outside Firelink Shrine, we found one of the fallen giants that were crucial to the plot of *Souls 2*. Near the end of the last game, you gained the power to enter the memories of these fallen giants for some of the adventure's best moments, letting you briefly fight in some of the epic battles that had led to the fall of Drangleic. Is this just a sly nod, or a welcome return for the brilliant memory sequences? We're crossing our fingers for the latter.

"WE FEEL NO GUILT FOR OUR MERCY KILLINGS HERE"

While their overwhelming numbers mean we take the odd trip back to a bonfire on the wrong end of a pitchfork, it's the new spellcaster who happily sentences us to some of our most embarrassing deaths. She wields a book of incantations, so we rush up to her before she can start casting. Our punishment for getting too close is a smack across the head with her book. So we hang back, only for her to cover herself with flames, then lock us in a molten hug. Which is more humiliating – death by literature or by cuddle?

Village of the damned

One of *Souls II*'s biggest missteps was its enthusiasm for copy-pasting foes from the first game, and after the slightly by-the-numbers nature of Lothric's hulking knights, the Undead Settlement benefits from giving you new threats. Weak, humanoid enemies that have been sealed in narrow cages might be the most tragic figures ever to grace a *Souls* game. Six to a cage that could suffocate one, those on the bottom use arms squashed through bars to claw their prison towards us. They're clearly in agony, and happy to share their pain if they get in close. We feel no guilt for our mercy killings here.

They're just the beginning. Tall, lumbering villagers armed with blood-splattered bonesaws give relentless chase. Smaller, faster enemies jump on our backs, their diddy stature and movements reminding us far too much of children, particularly when we've no choice but to defend ourselves. When we're not being doused by large bowls of blood, said stone vessels are being repeatedly mashed into our skulls. By the time we arrive at a pair of towering doors, any cockiness from mastering the previous games has been bashed, ripped and stabbed out of us.

Two notes are scrawled outside the doors: "Great curse-ridden tree ahead" and "A transporting kiln lies within the bell". These cryptic clues turn out to be feeble warnings for what's next, as our time with *Dark Souls III* has saved the nastiest surprise for last.

The Curse-Ridden Greatwood is an ancient tree that towers over a sealed-off clearing, surrounded by praying villagers ready to throw their lives away to protect it. Shuddering to life, the Greatwood reveals arms and legs that it uses to scramble towards us. It kicks at us and takes lunging sweeps, crushing anything foolish enough to get close, remorselessly slaying its fan club in the process. Its only weak point is at the base of its trunk, meaning you'll have to get close – and stay there – to bring it down. So we keep our shield up, go for quick lunges and hasty retreats, learning its attack patterns. The Greatwood's scale is intimidating, but we've brought down big bads before. Which is when we get our first surprise.

The Greatwood's trunk starts to split. Something wants out. Grey, slimy fingers stretch around the bark before an arm smashes free in a shower of green pus and snatches at us before we've any time to be shocked. The arm's size doesn't make any sense, it can't possibly be consistent with a monster that would fit comfortably inside the Greatwood, but since when have nightmares ever been concerned with logic? Factoring in a full-body crush, the Greatwood now has six points of attack, as well as all its acolytes desperate to impress the boss. The Xbox 360 could barely stutter us through Blighttown, let alone a battle of this scale. We try to accentuate the positive: it's not just an arm, but a brand new weak point to target. A powerful, clawed weak point that looks like it could easily crush us under a pinkie, but a weak point nonetheless. We dodge the villagers' hammers and blows, slice the Greatwood's cursed occupant, then hold back until our next opportunity. If only that was the last surprise.

When we're halfway to victory the Greatwood starts throwing a tantrum. It bashes the ground over and over with all its might, the screen shaking with each blow. By the time we realise what's happening, we're already free falling. The earth shatters beneath our feet and we all pour into the darkness.

We're hoping for fresher dragon face-offs after an overfamiliar set-piece reminded us of the first *Souls*.

We land in the Pit of Hollows, with no time to recover. The fall finished off the villagers, but the Greatwood is already back on the attack. A new environment forces us to improvise an alternative strategy on the fly as its hits get faster, more determined, the roaring music only outmatched by the crashing blows of our aggressor. Every successful slash from us is greeted with a sickening squelch, a spray of blood and a sliver off the Greatwood's health bar. But each successful hit from the Greatwood leaves us crushed, face eating the floor, on the verge of death, desperately forcing ourselves up before it gets in the finishing blow.

Third time unlucky?

Did we manage it? Of course. How many attempts? Doesn't matter. The point is, this is one of the best bosses *Souls* has ever thrown at us: always challenging, punishing the slightest of mistakes, throwing in a fresh twist whenever you start feeling comfortable, and leaving more questions than answers (what the hell was that thing inside the tree? A late-game monster saying an early hello, courtesy of that transporting kiln the note warned us about?).



Underestimate weak Hollows at your peril.

Dark Souls III is not a revolution. Nor, arguably, did it need to be. If we sound a bit down on what we've been put through so far it's only because this great adventure is also a very familiar one. Even the most innovative series start to feel formulaic when you're on the third entry, and glorious new visuals aren't enough to hide that we've done a lot of this before. But if that Greatwood fight is typical of the battles to come, if we've only seen a hint of *Dark Souls III*'s ambitions, then we'll be looking at a masterpiece of the genre. If it continues just being a solid *Dark Souls*, however, then it'll only be one of Xbox One's most essential games. Worse things have happened. Did we ever tell you about the time we got killed by a damn hug? ■



Much like Katie Hopkins, the Mancubus is needlessly inflammatory. Though this particular unwanted guest has flamethrowers for arms.

PUBLISHER BETHESDA SOFTWORKS / **DEVELOPER** ID SOFTWARE / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE

Doom

The series takes a chainsaw to convention as it looks to redefine the genre it helped to create

You'll remember, if, like us, you grew up with *Doom*, the excitement of witnessing the formative moments of deathmatching and a step change in what could be achieved with computer graphics. If you didn't, the likelihood is you're a school holiday *Call of Duty* irritant, or one of those kids on YouTube who when asked to insert a cartridge into an unfamiliar obelisk with 'Mega Drive' written on it ends up going to A&E to have a copy of *Sonic the Hedgehog* extracted from their now distended nostril. In either case, it's okay: id Software has your back.

The legendary Texan company is aiming to deliver on what, coming from many studios, might be considered a nebulous promise: to restore *Doom*'s former glory with a game that appeals both to the chainsaw-obsessed, WAD-making old guard and those who've never dabbled with DOS but have heard tell of mythical full-colour game manuals. Remarkably, after spending a couple of days with the game, it looks like id is on track with a riotous single-player campaign, a smartly balanced, purposeful multiplayer, and one of the most accessible level-creation tools we've ever laid our hands on.

But irrespective of the length of your *Doom* service record, this fourth version of the game feels immediately confrontational. Where the most prominent online shooters have evolved to reward whichever player spots their quarry first, and proffer advantages to those who have a fetishistic interest in a glut of scope

Bluffer's Guide

Doom was released in 1993 and has served as a high-water mark for developers ever since. The series flirted with horror in *Doom 3*, but is now returning to its fast-moving roots.


I/O LOGISTICS MANUFACTURE



The Revenant has nothing to do with Leonardo DiCaprio, but is particularly good at hunting you down.



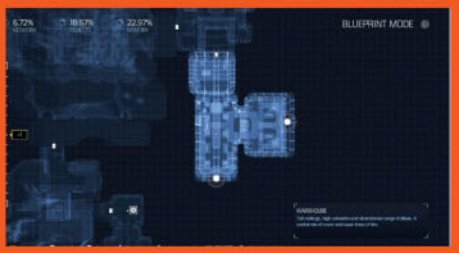
The beefy Hell Knights are a fearsome foe that require smart use of your abilities and the environment to defeat.

The monocular Cacodemons have gained arms and lost pupils. They're slow moving, but are still upon you before you know it.



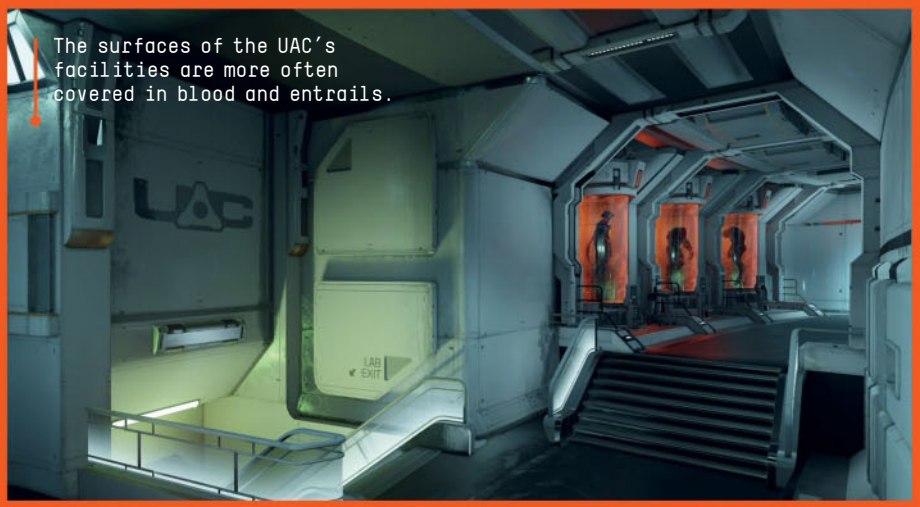




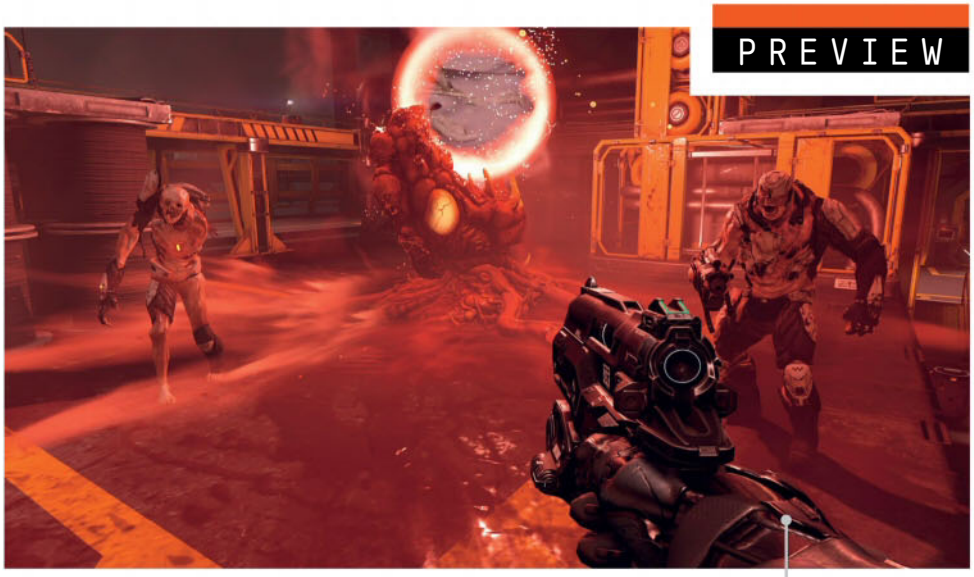








The surfaces of the UAC's facilities are more often covered in blood and entrails.



Portals must be destroyed to progress, but ripping out their glowing yellow hearts takes a second or two.

and barrel options, *Doom* goes back to basics. It's so concerted in its efforts, in fact, the first time you pull the trigger on one of the oversized weapons, you'd be forgiven for thinking it's woefully underpowered. Don't be surprised when, after landing a perfect headshot on a player who hasn't yet seen you, they turn around and run straight for you, returning fire in kind.

Unless you have temporary possession of the superpowered Railgun, one-shot kills are unlikely if your target hasn't already had their health chipped away at by a previous encounter. Instead, you'll enter into a deadly, balletic tussle as you dart in and out of cover, trading scorch marks, projectiles and blunt trauma until one of you yields to all the bruising and bleeding or succeeds in running away. id Software wants to reintroduce the kind of meaningful, escapable encounters that used to be standard genre fare (and, indeed, fair). These confrontations are all over in a matter of seconds, but within the context of today's breathlessly fast deathmatching landscape it feels like an eternity. *Doom* is no less slick as a result, instead coming across as equal parts anachronism and welcome breath of sulphurous hell air.

ETA 13 May

There's also no small amount of *Quake* DNA folded into the game, whether it's that chunky aesthetic, the satisfying sense of inertia, or those iconic diagonal jump pads that propel you across the level. And this push for greater mobility is further explored with Doomguy's new-found ability to mantle up to higher platforms, dash about at a fair old lick and double-jump about the place like a loon.

But the demonic population of *Doom*'s campaign is more than happy to answer your fresh athleticism with some quite terrifying fleet-footedness of its own. Imps scramble up walls and pillars to get to you or stay out of reach; Revenants quickly cover ground with a long stride and release fast-moving barrages of rockets like gangly, weaponised marionettes; and beefy Barons of Hell will happily propel themselves a storey or two in the air using their hooves and hairy haunches. There's no hiding and staying still means almost certain death.

To help manage the onslaught you have a large, always-accessible armoury (though in multiplayer you're limited to a more in-vogue two guns), which you can quickly switch between using a weapon wheel. When in it, time slows to a crawl, giving you extra breathing room while you work out which tool is best for eviscerating whichever hell spawn happens to be bearing down on you at that moment. They can all be modified, too, capable of hosting up to two secondary functions at any one time – the rocket launcher's projectiles can be detonated early if they sail wide of a target, for example, while a minigun erupts into a devastating three-pronged turret. In addition, significantly injuring enemies will put them into a stunned state, in which they flash blue when you're at a distance and orange when in range. Hit a button and you'll pull off a Glory Kill: a brief, canned animation in which you go hands-on with dismemberment. The kill you pull off depends on your angle of approach and will gift you health and ammo.

//There's no hiding and staying still means almost certain death//

Should this wide-ranging onslaught of violence prove too much, you can take a breather with SnapMap, *Doom*'s in-built map editor. We're told to work our way through the handful of brief training tasks. Fifteen minutes later, we've built our first level, replete with enemies and pick-ups courtesy of a pair of brilliantly conceived emitters that randomly populate your creations. You can stick with this, or hand-place every element, but in both cases the results are instantly playable and surprisingly solid. And id is already toying with the tool's potential – we're shown a tower defence effort and a brain-stretching memory challenge.

With no firm release date, there's still likely to be a reasonable wait left to endure for *Doom*. But what's already here is a striking riposte to its mechanically similar peers and one with every chance of proving you can teach an old god new tricks.

Ben Maxwell



Metadata

OR TRY...



WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER – Does a similar job of modernising a classic, though is more focused on story.



HALO 5 – The latest game in a series built on blistering tech, iconic enemy design and derisive humour.



Hell-ping hand

A custom Doom experience for all

Tied to currency earned from Glory Kills, you can buy character traits that significantly alter how the game plays. Timid players might want to go on the defensive, ensuring there's more health and ammo available to them, even keeping a chance to come back from an otherwise fatal blow in reserve. Bolder individuals, however, can opt to get a speed boost immediately after a Glory Kill in order to propel themselves across the room and into the next bloody brawl.



"Duck AND cover, soldier. Not 'duck in road where enemy can easily shoot you'."

PUBLISHER BULKHEAD INTERACTIVE / **DEVELOPER** BULKHEAD INTERACTIVE / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE

Battalion 1944

Ach nein! Der Zweite Weltkrieg Shooter ist zurück!

Bluffer's Guide

Multiplayer-only FPS that brings back the once-dominant WWII genre. Aims to capture the feel of early console shooters, but with the standards of a modern online FPS.

For first-person shooter fans at least, the Second World War used to be the perfect place to be. *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor* and a ton of imitators once competed for the console WWII crown. Then a little game called *Modern Warfare* dragged us kicking and screaming into the 21st century, revolutionising console multiplayer and killing off a once overstuffed genre in the process. World War II was officially over. And not in a good way.

But the genre might be having a comeback, now Bulkhead Interactive has successfully funded *Battalion 1944*, a multiplayer-only FPS for WWII-shooter fans, old and new. "This game is being made by designers who have grown up spending their days playing *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty 2*," says Joe Brammer, producer at Bulkhead Interactive. "We know what it was like to be a kid playing those games, we know what it means to care about first-person shooters, and we know what it means to feel disappointed by the state of the genre, particularly on consoles. We think it needs a revitalisation."

//The focus is on making sure "it's balanced, fair and, ultimately, fun"//

Far from mere fan service, the developers are ensuring *Battalion* has the production values and standards of a modern FPS. Real-world locations have been heavily researched, many turning out to be an FPS level designer's dream. As Brammer explains of the streets of Carentan, "It's totally positioned to be a place that's very difficult to take over, that's why the Germans set up there in the first place!" So a perfect FPS map, tailor-made. Thanks, Germans!

Naturally, a huge drawback to setting a realistic shooter during WWII is you're stuck with outdated weapons. Compared to the power of *Destiny*'s Gjallarhorn or *Battlefront*'s Pulse Cannon, your average '40s gun might as well shoot flags with 'bang!' written on them. Bulkhead Interactive doesn't see this as a problem, as it's determined to keep shootouts purely skill-based. No unlockable power-ups or game-breaking weapons, the focus instead is on making sure "it's balanced, fair and, ultimately, fun".

ETA 2017

Old-fashioned sensibilities perhaps, but online multiplayer is very much in keeping with the modern FPS scene. You can go it alone, or join a 'faction' of soldiers. Several of these factions make up a battalion, and these battalions are at constant war with each other for leaderboard dominance. Each platoon, and each soldier within it, contributes to their battalion's score and ranking by completing challenges or through victories on the battlefield. Again, player skill is the priority. At the end of each season, you'll receive awards you can put on your profile (or nothing if you spent the whole war peeling potatoes, coward). Then you're free to



The aim is to create a pure nostalgia trip and for skill to reign supreme.

Metadata

OR TRY...



CALL OF DUTY 2 – Back when *CoD* was new and not a licence to print money, there was no better WWII FPS.



MEDAL OF HONOR: AIRBORNE – Released two months before *Modern Warfare*, it was the last WWII-set *MoH*.

keep going, or join new platoons and abandon your battalion, Judas.

Battalion is a promising genre revival game aiming to give the WWII shooter an online scene and a production quality we've come to expect of modern shooters (weapon sounds are authentic and soldier movements have been fully mo-capped). This will be a war well worth... What's that? Where are your cyborg soldiers and zombie mode? You're a disgrace, soldier. Drop and give us 20.

Tom Stone

It's so great to see swastikas in a game again. Maybe we could have worded that better.



Q&A

Joe Brammer

Producer at Bulkhead Interactive explains why it's time for the WWII shooter to make a comeback

Why do you think now is the right time to bring back the World War II shooter?

World War II shooters fell out of fashion simply because there were too many doing the same thing. There was nothing new and, frankly, the film industry had overloaded us with WWII as well. Currently we're aware that WWII is not in the sights of the larger franchises. We believe this is a good thing, because they have their goals and targets, and they don't necessarily line up with what fans of first-person shooters really want to see. Right now, we have an opportunity. We can pull together as a community that adores first-person shooters and revitalise the genre, the way we, the players, want it to be. We have no hidden agenda, we are here because we want to play *Battalion* and we know others do too. We have the expertise, equipment, connections, talent, time and [now] the money to make the game we want to make.

What sets your game apart from modern multiplayer shooters and other WWII shooters?

Battalion 1944 is the only WWII next generation game where players will be able to find close-quarters, gritty combat in a competitive environment focused on pure skill that's backed up by the stunning visuals of Unreal Engine 4. Most shooters are focused on the big picture, with expansive maps, hundreds of vehicles, monetisation, as well as crazy overpowered killstreaks and unlocks, while *Battalion 1944* aims to keep things focused, just like the classics, but for the modern generation. We want to bring the classic-style shooter back to the forefront. No gun unlocks, no 'exosuits'... Just you and your skill as a player.

//We want to bring the classic-style shooter back to the forefront//

What was the process of designing weapons, and how did you decide what should be available for players to use?

We have so much history and reference material to work from that we're really spoiled for choice. All weapons will be faction-specific but the main aspect for us will be the overall balance of the weapons in gameplay situations. We're working on making each faction feel unique but not imbalanced, so our weapon set and design choices will reflect that. For example, in *Call of Duty 2* the bolt action un-scoped Kar98 had clear iron sights, making it a great weapon to use for precise aim at multiple ranges, but the un-scoped Lee Enfield had a physical loop on its iron sight, making it trickier to precisely pick out your targets – but the trade-off was you had a ten-bullet clip. We're looking to balance our weapons in a similar fashion while still retaining authenticity through our weapons' sounds and animations.



Holmes can now hurdle while wiping his nose.

Blowing up a house is a great way to make a horse perform an emergency stop.





PUBLISHER BIGBEN INTERACTIVE / **DEVELOPER** FROGWARES / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE

Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter

Sherlock Holmes Jr: elementary school, my dear Watson

Bluffer's Guide

Step into the shoes and, erm, slot your head into the deerstalker of Conan Doyle's famed literary crimebuster in his eighth trip to London's darkest corners.

Frogwares is impressively dedicated to Sherlock sims, this being its eighth since 2002. There were missteps along the way – who could forget Holmes taking down Jack the Ripper, or the creepy glitch that saw Watson manifest behind you like a not-so-Slenderman – but in 2014's *Crimes and Punishments* it finally hit upon the means of emulating the great detective's deductions. Linking clues in his 'mind palace' led you to implicate a variety of suspects – it was possible to send the wrong guy to the noose as long as a case could be logically built. It was refreshingly open for a normally linear genre.

Frogwares' CEO, Waël Amr, confirms to us that we'll be stringing together those neurons in *The Devil's Daughter*, but with a cruel twist: it's now possible for Holmes to botch interrogations and his close readings of suspects (that thing where he sees crumbs in your beard and a straining waistline and works out you've been abusing the cookies). Fail these exercises and the mind palace begins to look a little shabby. "Missing clues will result in more hazardous deductions at the end of the cases" says Amr. A tantalising twist.

What has happened to Holmes since 2014 to so dent his pondering prowess? Local cocaine dealers doing buy one, get one free? Not quite. According to Amr, "Our protagonists have changed, they are younger and more physically active. Their relationship has changed, too." A younger Holmes is more prone to mistakes (and Watson is presumably even faster at sneaking up on you), but it should make for a punchier game. "It has more dynamism," says Amr, "with fewer loading times, better controls and action sequences."

ETA 27 MAY

Action sequences in a *Holmes* game? *Crimes and Punishments* gave us arm wrestling and a bit where you harpooned a manky pig corpse, but it's hardly *Rambo*. Amr reassures fans that it's still faithful to their version of Holmes, but that it's more of an "action/adventure investigation" than *Crimes and Punishments*. A crucial part of this new, sprightlier pacing is variety. "Unlike many games that develop few mechanics and use them extensively, *The Devil's Daughter* has 98 mini-games and action sequences. Some are returning, but many are unique and required months of development." Oinkers beware: we're limbering up our harpoon arm as we write.

This has never been a series to stand still (insert another magically transporting Watson gag here), so you can't blame Frogwares for hooning off in a new direction. As long as it can keep the brawn from dumbing down the brains – *Crimes and Punishments* let you skip any mini-game not to your liking, for example – it should be a welcome return to 221B Baker Street.

Matthew Castle

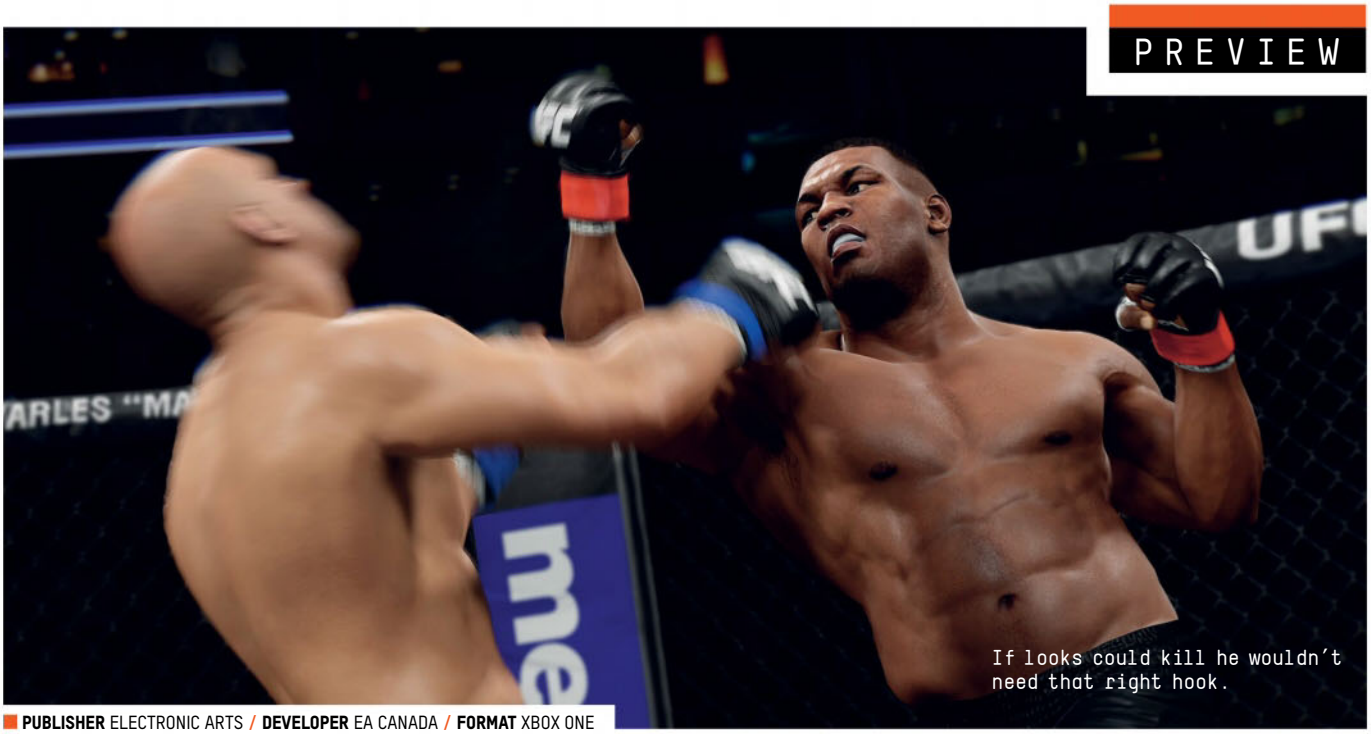
//Missing certain clues will result in more hazardous deductions//



GTA: Baker Street?

Victorian FilthTech

Turns out Xbox One is a dab hand at grime-rendering. "While *Crimes and Punishments* was on older platforms, the new console gives the opportunity to propose larger areas. The amount of detail packed is really high," says Amr. This means far larger areas for wannabe sleuths to poke around in – think *LA Noire* with fewer gurning suspects. *C&P* offered generous crime scenes itself – one case took you into an underground temple – so expect good things.



If looks could kill he wouldn't need that right hook.

PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS / **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE

EA Sports UFC 2

Punch, kick, it's all in the mind

Bluffer's Guide

Combining kick boxing, wrestling, jiu jitsu and countless others, mixed martial arts is the name of the sport and UFC is its dominant paymaster.

Propelled by hefty ratings for the UFC's star turns Conor McGregor and Ronda Rousey, 2015 was a vintage year for mixed martial arts' premier organisation. And with those two on the cover of the game, EA will be hoping that *UFC 2* does similarly big business this year.

In the real fight business there are no guarantees. The supposedly invincible Rousey got brutally annihilated in her last match, much to the delight of hardcore fans who claimed they never liked her in the first place, and nobody knows what she'll be like should she ever return to the Octagon for more. We're writing this a month before McGregor takes on Rafael Dos Anjos in what could be either a career-defining victory or an aura-deflating beatdown.

But on Xbox One things are at least a little more predictable. *UFC 2* expands on EA's solid but unspectacular 2014 effort, addressing issues such as the difficulty of the ground game and the lack of game modes, while remaining reasonably familiar to anyone who's already accustomed to the underlying standup *clinch* grapple gameplay.

The revised grappling controls simplify the ground game, with a pop-up menu of guard passes, postures and, once you're in the right position, submissions. You just select the one you want and hold the stick until a timer bar fills up, giving the player on the bottom a chance to counter. Submission attempts initiate a mini-game in which thumbstick directions pop up on a set of concentric rings at random intervals. Tap the appropriate commands to light up all the rings and complete the submission, or switch them off and escape if you're defending.

ETA 17 MAR

The roster of fighters has been expanded to 250-odd, covering the majority of current active UFC fighters as well as retired veterans and some non-MMA celebrity surprises. Sadly, in the spirit of the UFC's dreary corporate lockdown on clothing and sponsors, you won't get any of the colourful gear many of these athletes are famous for wearing. Everybody gets regulation black or white Reebok, or a kind of khaki 'classic' kit for fighters who predate the Reebok deal.

Signature fighting styles weren't always immediately apparent in the preview version. We tried a surprisingly ripped 170lb BJ Penn, and he didn't seem massively different from WWE import CM Punk (who rates highly, despite never having fought). But the create-a-fighter mode reveals an array of options, including signature taunts and celebrations, so we suspect it's a matter of spending long enough with one fighter to spot the nuances. Even with just the welterweight division to choose from in the preview version, the choice is overwhelming. It's clear that *UFC 2* is doing it bigger than ever.

Martin Kitts

//It's clear that *UFC 2* is doing everything it bigger than ever//



KTFO

Knockout mode has us knock-kneed

To cater for 'just bleed' fans who groan with disappointment every time a fight hits the ground (listen to the boos in the live broadcasts whenever fighters spend too long hugging each other on the floor), knockout mode is 100% standup. Kicks, punches, knees and elbows only, with fights ending when one combatant is laid out, stiff as a board, sucking air through the bubbling ruin of what was once his face. (Note: MMA is still banned in the state of New York.)



An army so hardcore they don't even fear flaming mushroom clouds. Kids, stay away from flaming mushroom clouds.

PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX / **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE

Final Fantasy XV

Now entering 15 years of development! Well, that's what it feels like...



Prince Noctis and his friends are sneaking through an enemy base, infiltrating it in an attempt to bring down a totalitarian government. Hulking mechs stomp past, war machines that will slaughter on sight. Perhaps Noctis could wear a cardboard box and slip by unnoticed? The prince would laugh at such primitive tactics, as he pulls out his sword and creates a warp point a few hiding spots away. Noctis teleports across, one step closer to infiltration. But why sneak by at all? He can set a warp point on an enemy's back, then teleport in for a killer sword strike.

It's our favourite *Metal Gear Solid V* mod yet and, bizarrely, it's called *Final Fantasy XV*. This is one of the many bases that can be infiltrated by *XV*'s royal hero Prince Noctis and his friends. Usually, discovering that an RPG has stealth sections is enough to send us into hiding, but Noctis' battle-warping breathes new strategy into a genre Kojima arguably mastered last year. This has been *FFXV*'s mission from the beginning, bringing a surprising abundance of fresh ideas to a series now on its 15th numbered sequel.

After *Final Fantasy* arguably played it too safe last-gen, these changes are crucial. *XV*'s real-time combat and dynamic mechanics are a world away from the turn-based tedium of *XIII*. We never thought we'd be comparing combat in a *Final Fantasy* game to *Devil May Cry*, but *XV*'s aerial sword-slashing seems determined to keep you airborne as much as possible. So long as you

Bluffer's Guide

Prince Noctis and his friends battle the Niflheim Empire, in a *Final Fantasy* that's as much shooter and aerial combat fighter as it is JRPG.



"Fighting fire is all about confidence. Or is that bears?" Thinking's hard when your brain's aflame.



Noctis bravely blocks Aranea's attack, while Prompto appears to be on his knees weeping. Wuss.













Sadly, our stealth attempts in most games end this way. Refreshing to see that encouraged.



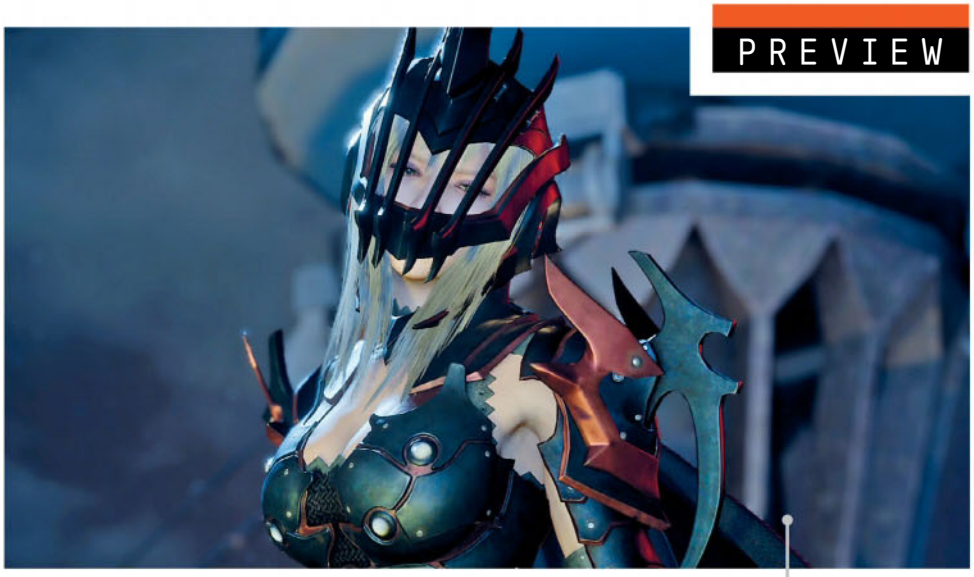
keep flitting between warp points and attacking, you can potentially keep your feet off the ground for whole battles.

That's more helpful than we first realised, as an updated magic system means the ground has never been more dangerous. You start with access to Elemental magic, which comes in three types: Fire, Blizzard and Thunder. These behave a lot more realistically than long-term *Final Fantasy* fans might expect. The classic fireball that would strike a lone monster has been replaced with a wide-ranging attack – one that'll keep burning if you use it in flammable areas. So if you're battling in the fields, flames will spread along the grass, hurting enemies and allies alike.

Weather conditions affect magic, so heavy downpours will extinguish flames, but also make Thunder attacks more powerful. In fact, between our Thunder strikes and freezing Blizzard spells, we don't see creatures from the deep having much luck against us. Fans already brewing up a curse potion to punish the lack of spells in the game should know this will only be the case at the start. 'Ring Magic' will unlock later on in the story, though what this entails remains a mystery. We already know enemies have different spells from your elemental three, including the power to turn you into a frog. Get used to it, Noctis. This sort of thing happens to handsome princes all of the time.

Amphibian enthusiasm aside, foes are not to be taken lightly, especially main antagonists, the Niflheim Empire. They've dominated most of the world due to their power to mass produce war machines and mechanical foot soldiers, known as the Magitek Infantry. Noctis is the prince of the Kingdom of Lucis, the last independent society from Niflheim rule. Together with childhood friends, Gladio, Prompto and Ignis, Noctis is constantly fighting back the stranglehold of the Niflheim force.

Which brings us back to that *Metal Gear*-style sneaking, as the gang infiltrate a Niflheim base. The twist is that being caught is far from game over, because sneaking inside undetected isn't your objective. Your goal is all-out destruction, getting to a weak point then destroying the place from within. Bases have been designed to fall apart as they take damage, the trick being to use their own defences against them. A gun turret is soon being used by Noctis to destroy the very base it was designed to protect.



Aranea Highwind, mysterious antagonist and 'Captain of the empire's Third Army Corps 87th Airborne Unit'. Catchy!

//We never thought we'd be comparing combat in a *Final Fantasy* game to *Devil May Cry*//

Oh irony, you're almost as sweet as the sounds of turret fire. Grunts riding in Magitek armour exo-suits start attacking, one electrocuting the base's metal floor. Two can play the elemental game, as the gang penetrate the armour, causing oil to pour out. Cue a flaming explosion worthy of *Just Cause*.

As well as more advanced magic, core combat has come a long way since Operation Duscae. We'd seen three combo types before; combos automatically triggered during combat, combos that triggered when we successfully parried attacks and combos triggered by our allies. But now we get a fourth option to prompt allies into combos ourselves. As your allies grow and level up, new combos can be chosen from skill trees, giving you more command choices. It keeps your focus on the whole group of pals rather than just yourself.

ETA 2016

Metal Gear stealth, *Call of Duty* turret-shooting and *Minecraft* levels of inadvertent pyromania – these aren't the usual influences we expect a JRPG to have. At least *XV*'s core theme of friendship is recognisably *Final Fantasy*, with each party member having his use. Prompto can fire flares, which effect light-averse enemies that only come out at night. Ignis marks monsters with warp points, which we can use for aerial takedowns. Gladio has a powerful area attack that can turn the tide of a tough battle. We even saw a Chocobo getting in on the team spirit, giving a Niflheim grunt a good kick. Then after a long day of battling evil, everyone goes down the pub. This eclectic mix of shooting, sneaking, cooking, aerial combat, arson and male bonding is redefining what a *Final Fantasy* game can be.

Tom Stone

Metadata

PREVIOUSLY IN...



FF XIII – *XV* is a direct response to *XIII*'s mixed reception. But the linear pace and tedious characters...



FF XIII-2 ... didn't stop it being so successful that it generated two hit sequels.



The world is yours

Blow it all up or rebuild it better?

There are incentives to keeping your explosive side in check. Instead of destroying them outright, Noctis and his party can simply take over Niflheim bases. The main conflict is the fight between Kingdoms for world domination, so we wouldn't be surprised if this was a big part of the final game. We're used to saving the world in *Final Fantasy*, but this time we'll be having a more direct impact upon it. Hopefully not just because we accidentally cast fire and burnt it all down.

Hilarious food fight, or brutal riot pitting undertrained wardens against murderous lifers? We think you know the answer.



PUBLISHER INTROVERSION SOFTWARE / **DEVELOPER** DOUBLE ELEVEN / **FORMAT** XBOX 360, XBOX ONE

Prison Architect

Be it holiday camp or work camp, build your own epic jail

As the name suggests, this is a construction and management sim in the mould of classics such as *Sim City* and *Theme Park*, but with a fascinating twist; instead of trying to attract little people into your complex, you're trying to stop them from escaping. Your only remit is to maintain order within the prison, and since there's no obligation to keep your captives happy, you can choose to do that by being as big a bastard as the (ever bendable) rules allow.

Bluffer's Guide

Build and maintain a nice, cosy social home for society's various misfits and ne'er-do-wells. *Sim City* meets *Sin City*, if you like.

I mean, sure, you could water down your drinks to raise profit margins in *Theme Park*, but in *Prison Architect* you can be corrupt to the point where you wonder if you're even on the right side of the bars anymore. We're talking ruling with a culture of fear; armed guards on every corner and random cell shakedowns. We're talking a culture of greed: one warden you can appoint skims a cut from prisoner contraband transactions, so it's actually in your interest to design your prison in such a way that relatives can sneak in goodies without detection. We're talking flat-out rule-breaking: in your prison's development tree, you can choose to invest in lawyers who can bend the law to your will, for example, by exploiting legal loopholes that will let you house your crims in smaller-than-mandated cells, meaning you can pack 'em in tight and bring home more money for your facility.

ETA SUMMER

Perhaps you prefer to create a nice atmosphere for your inmates, give them cushy jobs and chilled schedules, and try to reform them. But give them an inch and they might take a mile – get too lax with security and you could find yourself facing riots and fires, or with gangs running the asylum.

Turn a blind eye to contraband and prisoners will begin to dig tunnels to freedom. Clearly the most efficient architects will strike a balance: too lenient and you're likely to be fired due to disorder; too iron-fisted and it'll be the mortality rates that get you canned. But, if you're building your prison from scratch, half the

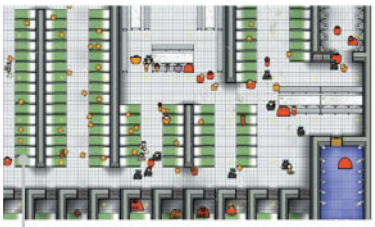


Trace-off

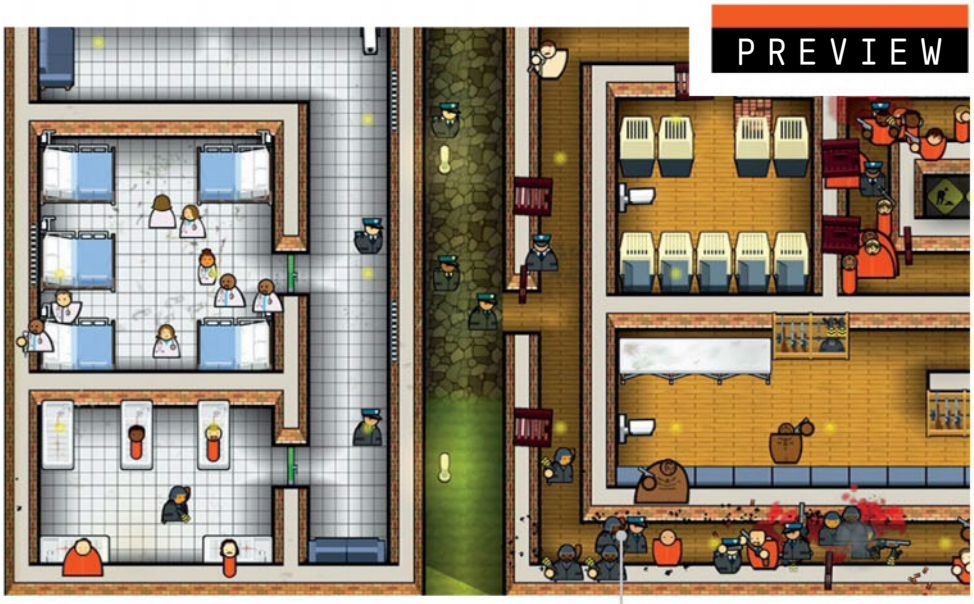
Tracing contraband back to source

A cool thing is that contraband doesn't just magic out of thin air – it has to physically enter the prison, and if you're eagle-eyed you can see the prisoner smuggling it. When your guards uncover an illegal item you can trace its movements back – how they got it through metal detectors, where it came from, and who gave it to them. Visitors are a regular source, and sometimes criminals pluck items out of the kitchen for themselves.

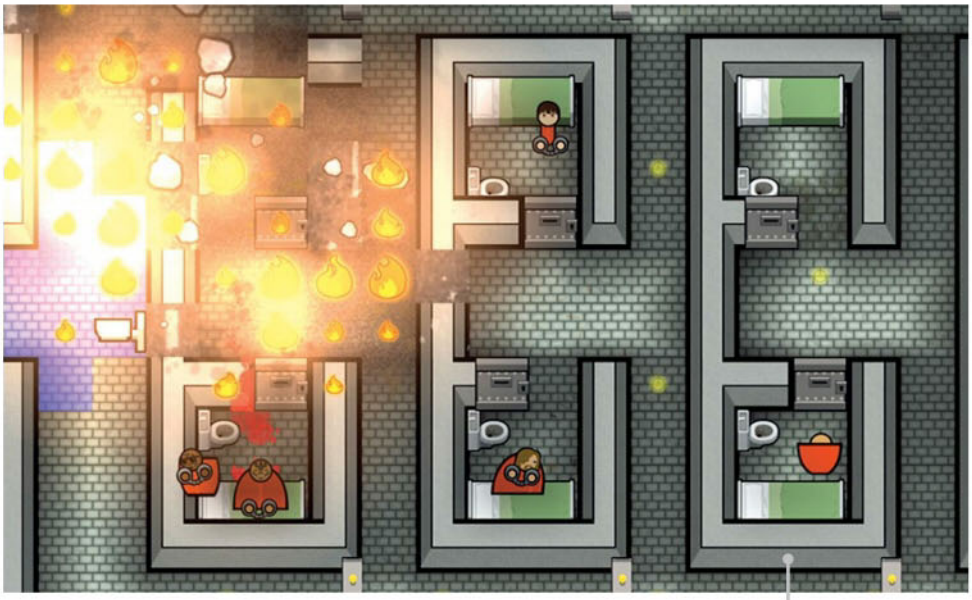




If gangs are allowed to form, it's bad news; they club together and attempt to control valuable areas.



This doesn't appear to be the scene of a functional prison. Good job it has health care facilities.







Tough to be too concerned when you remember that these punks are in here for late payment of their TV licence.

//One of the earlier stages asks you to build an execution room and send an inmate to the chair//

fun lies in picking a strategy and designing a prison that implements it to perfection. That's what PC owners have been doing for the past few years, sharing their creations online. Some of the more outlandish have been immortalised on this console port as pre-packaged maps, including Forever Inn, a brutally efficient supermax prison that houses over 900 jailbirds.

Of course, Xbox players can still create and share the deathtraps of their dreams, and it's just as easy with a controller as it is with a mouse thanks to a smartly implemented interface. You flit between the four functions – Reports, Construction, Prison Running and Emergencies – via the D-pad, while a to-do list in the corner of the screen highlights your prison's most pressing issues. If you select a problem, it'll warp you right to where you need to go in the menus to address it. Construction is also zippier; you can pick out basic templates for different types of rooms (cells, gyms, shops et al) and paste them into your map before making refinements. The cursor is also context sensitive, so if you highlight a wall it'll make suggestions for you. A window, perhaps? No such luxuries in our cauldron of a prison, we're afraid.

The biggest knock on the PC version was that it wasn't very accessible. This is addressed not only by the streamlined interface but also with a scenario mode that teaches you the ropes by throwing you into an existing prison and asking you to fix its problems. It doesn't faff around – one of the earlier stages asks you to build an execution room and send a bothersome inmate to the chair. Your prisoners' ultimate fate is a brilliantly implemented part of the game's system. You play the role of parole officer, deciding what targets your lags need to hit before they're released. Make them too lenient and they'll ping back into your prison like a boomerang and the council will be breathing down your neck. Harbour a prison of lifers and you might struggle to keep order. You get a cash injection for sending a prisoner to the chair, but this is a process you have to sign off on personally – difficult when everyone in the game has a personality.

Currently serving its time on Xbox Game Preview, the final version is up for parole this summer. We've been waiting a while for this generation's *Sim City*, and early indications are that this jailbird can sing.

Alex Dale

Metadata

BIG IDEA...

If you want to know more about your prisoners' needs, wants and desires, invest in the psychology branch of the skill tree. Beats just asking them, we suppose.





STROKE OF MADNESS

In Dangerous Golf, without the albatross of technical limitations around their neck, the makers of Burnout take a swing at creating the Crash mode they always dreamed of. Fore!

Words: Alex Dale

When it comes to whetting your appetite, *Dangerous Golf* knows just how to lay the table. With candlesticks and champagne bottles to start, followed by teetering piles of china plates and fragile wine glasses for the main course. And for dessert? How about a tray of annoyingly fussy vol-au-vent pastries, each one costing more than your mortgage, and each one filled with a jam that would look fantastic smeared across the floor?

It is a gross display of extravagance. A final camera sweep across the banquet gives you one last chance to drink in the opulence before the round begins. At which point it's time for you to waltz into the scene with a nine iron and raise as much hell as possible. Fore!

We're feasting our eyes on the first stop on *Dangerous Golf*'s 100-stage-long world tour – a whirlwind journey from America to Australia that has you tee off on unlikely holes set everywhere from ballrooms to bathrooms. Along the way this deceptively simple puzzler packs in a surprising amount of variety, but if all the screens have one thing in common, it's this: they're all settings that *beg* to be smashed to tiny, irretrievable pieces.

It should come as no surprise that the first game to fly out of Three Fields Entertainment's bunker is about wanton destruction. Carnage is written into the Hampshire-based studio's DNA, founded as it was in 2014 by ex-Criterion Games alumni Alex Ward, Fiona Sperry and Paul Ross. Criterion of course is the studio behind the critically-acclaimed *Burnout* games – the racing series that didn't just make crashing fun, it made it a prerequisite. A visit to Three Fields is a visit to the people who wrote the book on destruction... and then blew it up.

Having spent the past 15 years working under the thumb of big-business publishers such as



Shattering plates make a pleasingly ear-shredding sound and they build up your Smashbreaker score rapidly, so go for it!

Acclaim Entertainment (ask your dad) and Electronic Arts, Ward and Co have decided to blow up the rulebook to boot, branching out to go independent.

A small operation consisting of just a dozen or so employees, Three Fields obviously doesn't have the financial heft Criterion had at its peak, but the studio compensates in other ways. The first is through sheer workrate – Ward explains that the company's name is a reference to the way each member of *Dangerous Golf*'s development team has had to excel in three different fields of expertise, not just one. The other factor they boast is something there's no substitute for: experience.

Chip off the old block

Three Fields' numbers might be few but they include some of the most influential people in Criterion history. Chris Roberts was lead designer on *Burnouts 2, 3* and *Revenge*. Alex Veal and Phil Maguire were instrumental in building the online modes and Autolog social platform for later Criterion games such as *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit* and *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*.

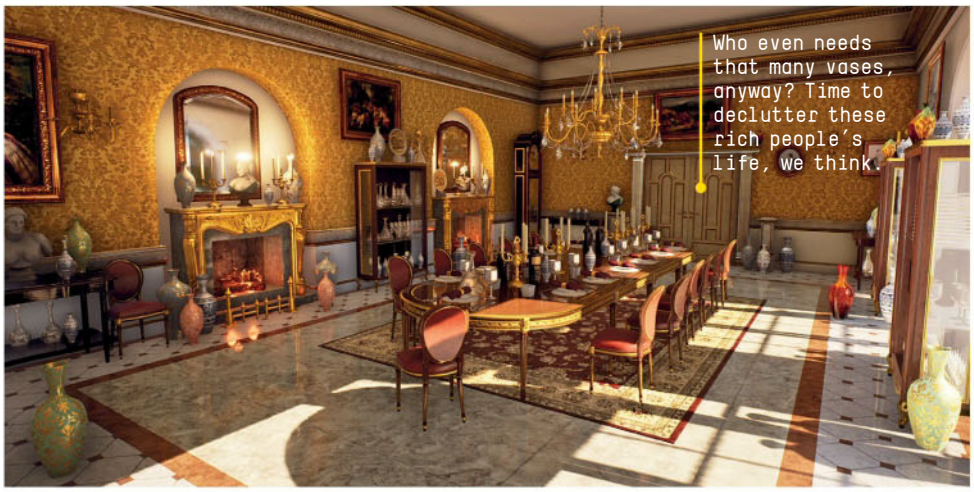
Over previous console generations Criterion had a reputation for squeezing more from limited hardware than any other developer going, and our visit to

> "YOU DON'T PLAY FOR PAR. YOUR SCORE'S BASED ON HOW MUCH DAMAGE YOU CAUSE"

Three Fields' office shows that this resourceful team is continuing to innovate. Physics, unsurprisingly, is an area the team is investing heavily in. Paul Ross, who helped build the physics engines for numerous Criterion titles from *Burnout Paradise* to Dreamcast hoverboard racer *TrickStyle*, begins our visit by showing us clips of various rendered objects colliding and disintegrating as they would in real life, with the location of the impact, and the nature of the objects involved, determining how the doomed objects fracture and crumble. The calculations aren't in real time yet – although that is the studio's ultimate goal over the next few years – but already the early work has resulted in a more dynamic physics engine, enabling the team to create the *Burnout* Crash mode it always wanted to make. So, without more ado, it's time to rev up those... caddies?

It's clear that the team aren't making a golf game because they have one eye on retirement activities. This isn't the kind of sports sim the PGA Tour would put its name to, or even Tiger Woods at his lowest ebb. Rather, this is a throwback to '90s arcade games such as *NBA Jam*, which use a real-world sport as a conceptual launch point but then spiral off into something more abstract and exciting, by focusing on and exaggerating the most thrilling part of the sport. With basketball and *NBA Jam*, that's dunking. With golf – well, it's not attempting to scuff the ball out of a sand bunker, is it?

"Why don't players share their exploits in golf sim games?" Ward asks rhetorically as the French leg of the World Tour boots up on the big screen. "It's because golf is a game of failure." Having racked up scores on previous *PGA Tour* games so high that EA needed to patch in a longer scoreboard, we find it difficult to disagree. *Dangerous Golf*'s solution: you don't play for par. At all. Instead, your score is based on how



Who even needs that many vases, anyway? Time to declutter these rich people's life, we think.



The search for the missing pack of Fruit Pastilles continues...



During Smashbreaker, you can hold down RB to slow down time, to line up the perfect shot.

BLACK HOLE FUN

KNOCKING OUT THE FLAGPOLE OPENS A CAN OF WORM(HOLES)

You can leverage an unusual property of the finish flag to earn extra points, if you're skilful enough. Turns out it's actually a *black hole*, ready and willing to suck in any debris that lands nearby, and spitting out extra points in return. Smashing objects into the path of the hole *can* reap big rewards – but you need to make sure your aim is dead on, otherwise you risk cluttering the path to the hole during the follow-up putt.

WELCOME TO THE CLUB

TIME FLIES IN THE TOILETS FROM TRUE LIES

As you progress through the World Tour, timed courses begin to appear. In these you begin with almost no time at all, and the only way to extend the clock is to smash stuff up. One memorable such mission takes place in a perfect replica of the toilet shootout scene from the 1994 film *True Lies* – and if you play it right, it ends up in the same state as it did on the silver screen. Another interesting twist found on this level are the bronze, silver, gold and platinum flags dotted around the floor. Potting these before the finish flag earns you extra points, and extra *extra* points if you do them in order. And extra, extra, *extra* points if you do them in succession, which makes you feel like Ronnie O'Sullivan to boot.

On this particular level, there's an additional twist. Usually, all the flags are present and correct at the start of the stage, but here, the flags only reveal themselves one by one when you pass score thresholds. With the clock ticking, you have it all to do if you hope to platinum this stage.



Each trashed urinal awards an extra five seconds on the clock.



"STEER THE FLAMING BALL AROUND, TAKING OUT THE MOST EXPENSIVE ITEMS"





Some unknown hoodlum in our office pretty much does this to our facilities every week.



Oops. Nothing a little dab of Blu-Tack can't remedy, we're sure.

much damage, in dollars, you can cause over the course of two swings. There are four different score targets to hit – from bronze to platinum – and although it's not an instant fail if you don't pot the ball at the end of the run, it sees your overall points total halved, making it highly unlikely you'll scrape much more than a low bronze.

So, we're left with something that focuses solely on the two sexiest parts of golf – the initial drive and the putt at the end. The result is something more akin to billiards than golf, as you rotate the camera around the ball and try to deduce which shot is likely to rack up the biggest insurance bill. Or, instead of billiards, a better comparison might be *Burnout*'s Crash mode, but instead of propelling a car into rush hour traffic, you're firing a small dimpled ball into a tray of jam tarts.

The wreckage is no less impressive for it. As we've mentioned, each stage is built for destruction. Ward likens the sets to the villain's lair in a film – china shops that are just gagging for a bull to stampede into them. When you line up your initial shot, there's no shortage of candidates – a priceless Ming vase on a marble plinth, maybe, or an elaborate chandelier that dangles over the table like the Sword of Damocles.

But often you'd be wise to forego the stage's obvious charms and aim at something less obvious, like a cupboard packed full of trinkets, because your primary aim should be to whittle down the Smashbreaker tally to zero. This number differs from course to course, but is often over 100, so it's quantity rather than quality that you're going for from the first drive.

An easy putt – but with each ricochet multiplying your score, you should chance a trickshot.

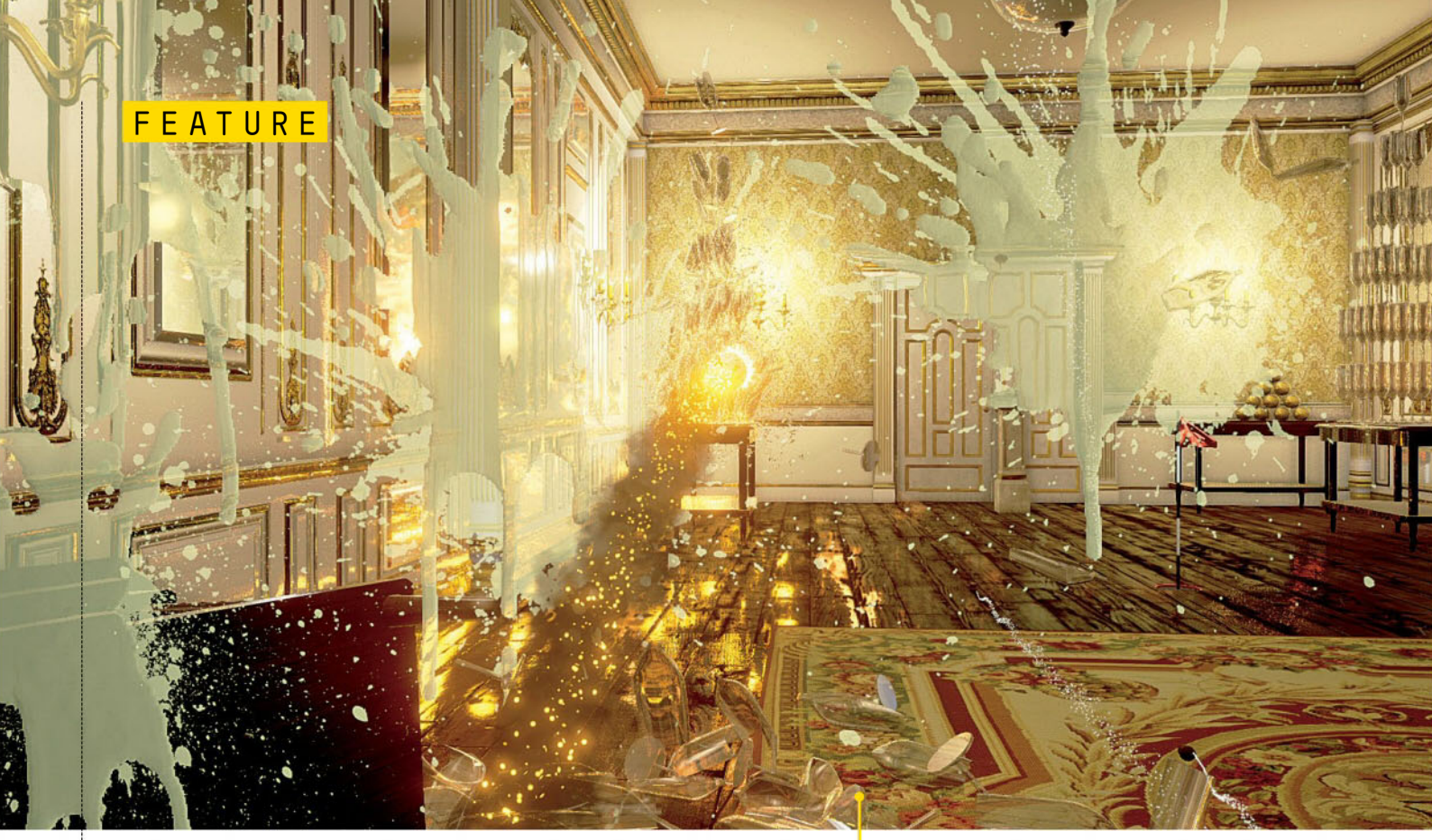


The Smashbreaker works exactly like the Crashbreaker in *Burnout 3* – that is, it allows you to trigger an explosion within the ball, propelling it forward for a second time, except this time you have a say over the ball's movements, dragging it around with the camera in an imprecise way that brings to mind *Burnout 3*'s Aftertouch. One functional difference between Smashbreaker and Crashbreaker is that there's no time limit; once the ball settles, you have all the time in the world to line up your next shot. Enquiring about this change reveals a surprising fact: the team never wanted to impose a time limit on Crashbreakers, but were forced to because on PlayStation 2, if the crash was allowed to go on for too long, the framerate would collapse on itself. Not an issue here.

Taking a swing

It's during this part of the round that you want to go for the big scores, steering the flaming sphere around the room like a wrecking ball, taking out the most expensive items you can find. Blindly crashing through all and sundry is one way to rack up the points, but canny players will take a more surgical approach. Pressing Y at any time highlights the objects on the field of play that are "grouped together" – in the dining table example, these are two trolleys and three champagne bottles. Hitting the objects in a single run wins a beefy bonus and should be prioritised over carnage for its own sake.

But as vital as it is to cut a swathe through as much as possible during the Smashbreaker stage, you want to make sure the ball lands somewhere where you can reasonably expect to putt it into the hole, because otherwise it'll all be for nothing. You can actually stop the ball dead on its tracks at any time by pulling down the triggers, which is useful if you have a specific shot in mind, but you don't want to make it too easy for yourself. While a safe, easy



Crash into liquids and the stuff squirts over the screen, like this milk here. (We hope that's milk.)

"No Smoking" is another timed event. Trash all four petrol pumps for a huge score bonus.

"GLUE BALLS STICK TO THE FIRST SURFACE THEY HIT, AND ARE ALSO RIGGED TO BLOW"

putt ensures you won't go through the heartbreak of having your score halved, a trickshot that bounces off a couple of walls before sliding in will pot you an even higher score.

These trickshots become even more important during multiplayer player v player rounds. Whereas in traditional golf the trailing player is doomed, here the losing player has the chance to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat with an audacious trickshot that sends their multiplier through the roof and compensates for a lacklustre first drive. The best way to play *Dangerous Golf* with a friend, however, is together.

Making the links

Think back to the *Burnout* Crash modes of yore: Criterion had always wanted to code a co-operative mode, where a second player follows up by ploughing into the wreckage caused by the first player, but technical limitations meant this wasn't possible. *Dangerous Golf* finally makes good on the promise, and its co-op mode, which can be played either online or locally, gives each stage a new lease of life, with fresh leaderboards and ramped-up score targets to aim for. In co-op, restraint becomes the unlikely watchword, as the first player has to make sure to leave enough items standing so that the second can still reach their Smashbreaker target.

Like all good puzzle games, *Dangerous Golf* gradually introduces new ideas and twists to keep things fresh. As our time with the game was nearing the end, Ward enthusiastically announced that it was time to show us "the weird stuff"– which seemed odd, given that we'd actually just finished demolishing Michelangelo's entire back catalogue of sculptures with a single errant golf ball. But things got weirder still, as we were transported to a later stage set inside a convenience store. Here, the entire nature of the balls we used had changed. Now they were sticky and glued themselves to the first surface they struck. They're also rigged to blow, so after pasting three of these so-called "glue balls" where we thought they would do the most damage, we putted the last, normal ball into the hole – causing the mother of all explosions.

If there's a lesson Three Fields has taken away from its time developing and refining *Burnout*'s popular Crash side-mode, it's that there needs to be order among the chaos. That's what *Dangerous Golf* brings to the party – as maddeningly random as it seems when you're bulldozing through a row of urinals or splattering paint cans across an art gallery, there's a perfect science ticking away underneath, through its advanced physics engine and its numerous watertight high-score mechanics, which make this a reliable and engaging score attack game in a way that the *Burnout* Crash modes never *quite* managed. If you loved *Burnout* Crash, Three Fields looks to have set up a superb spiritual successor here. All you need to do now is knock it down.



FROM FENDERS TO THE FAIRWAY

CREATIVE DIRECTOR ALEX WARD TALKS ABOUT THE APPEAL OF DESTRUCTION AND EXPLAINS WHY THREE FIELDS DECIDED TO SET THE GENTLEMAN'S GAME AFLAME



OXM *Burnout*, *Black*, *Dangerous Golf*… Why does destruction appeal to you as a game concept?

Alex Ward I think the reason I'm drawn to it is that it gives a very clear indication to the player as to how they achieve success in the game. Some people could say that destruction is cathartic. It's very satisfying to watch in movies, but I think with games it goes all the way back to *Space Invaders*. You can clearly see you're wearing down a pack. It's a clear visual indicator that tells you how well you've done.

OXM As a studio you're investing heavily in physics. How will this make your games better and differentiate you?

AW Physics is something we struggled with at Criterion, which is pretty important when you're trying to make a car game. It can change the way a lot of things are. I think Paul [Ross] has a vision of how interactive worlds can be different going forward. You know we used to say "Can you shoot the tyres out of a car? Can you shoot the lights out and make it go dark?" Things that you see in films all the time, but it's a lot more difficult in games because the destruction isn't scripted. We figured physics was something we wanted to really understand better in order to make the immersive experiences we want to make in the future.

OXM It must have been a temptation to make your first game a racing game, to build on *Burnout*/*Need For Speed*'s legacy and fanbase?

AW Only for about 30 seconds. No, I think we want to do something different and say "What do you want to do this year? Maybe we should try this. Maybe we should try that. I've got this new idea or I've just been using this technology and we could try that." I think it wasn't obvious to us what we were going to do until after we formed.

OXM It would have defied the point of starting a new studio?

AW If we want to just carry on making driving games all the time, the games may be different but a lot of the underlying work is the same from game to game, and on a big team you normally just find you're rewriting some of the artist's work, or making AI a little bit better, or you're improving the vehicle models maybe slightly. There is some interest in making another car game, sure, but we'd only start work on a project like that when we feel really comfortable with the tools and technology because we've had to learn a lot since leaving Electronic Arts. We've learned an incredible amount, having to catch up in the areas where we felt we were behind or lacking.

OXM What inspired you to bring golf out of the open and into the opera house?

AW Who doesn't want to make a big mess? You don't get to do it in life. We live in a world that's controlled, there's surveillance everywhere, there's rules everywhere, you can't park here and you have to drive at this speed and sometimes you just want to smash the place up. What do they say in *Batman*? Some people just want to see the world burn. Yeah, but some people want to spill milk and squirt ketchup and mustard on the TV and expensive stuff as well. In *Moonraker*, the glass factory in Venice is a great place for a shootout. Where's a good place for a fight? It's where the environment gets destroyed as well.

OXM At its heart, *Dangerous Golf* is a score attack game. How do you plan to exploit Xbox Live to keep things competitive? The stuff you did with Autolog, the social platform in Criterion's *Need For Speed* games, was pretty innovative on Xbox 360…

AW Well, we have leaderboards, so you'll be able to see who's the best in the world and you'll be able to see what your friends are doing. We're also toying with some ideas on what we can do with medals – that once you've earned a gold, a bronze or a platinum, is there a medal you can earn for beating your friends across the different holes? The Autolog stuff was quite a lot of work and we won't undertake something similar for this, but if we made another one Alex [Veal] and Phil [Maguire] were two of the key coders from the Autolog group so they know that world pretty well. But the call to action, as we call it, is pretty important. We think about that a lot. ■



Each level has a hidden "secret sauce" container to uncover and destroy.



In truth, we'd hate to see what Three Fields would do with a cricket ball.

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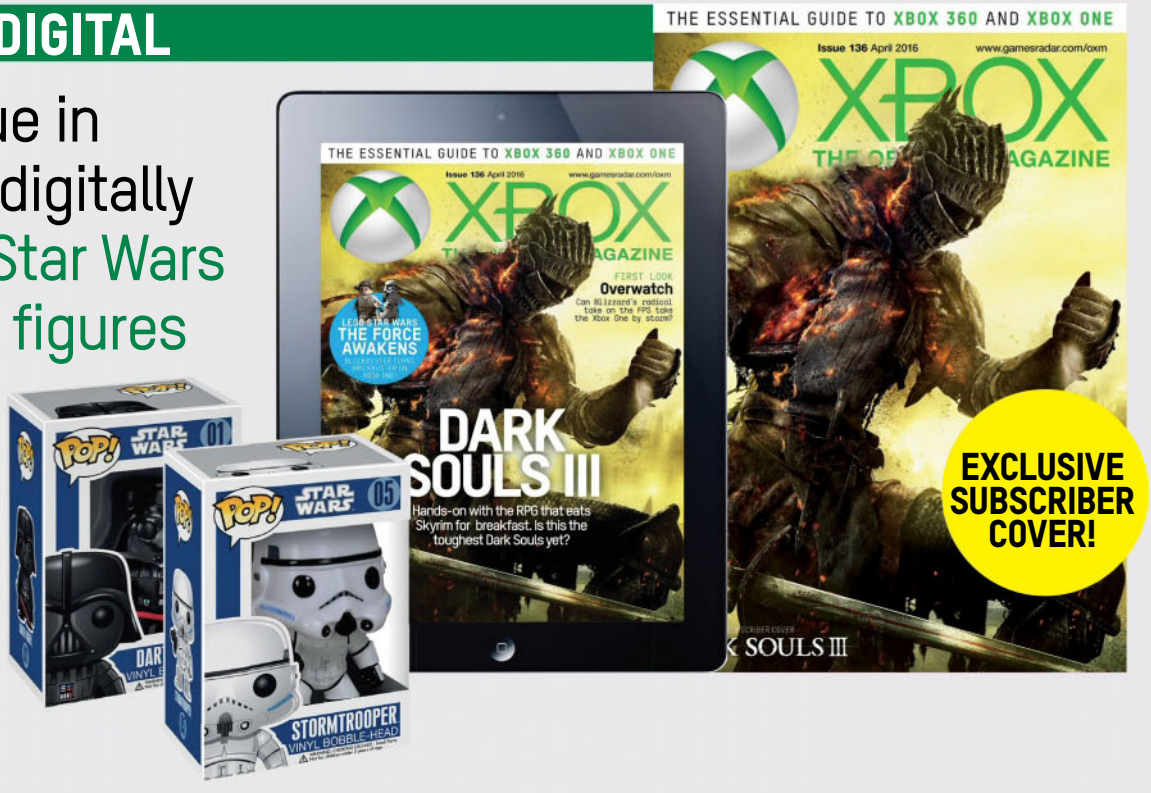
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FEATURE

THE BRAVE AND THE BOLD

Words: Chris Thursten



Blizzard returns to console with Overwatch, an ambitious and inventive multiplayer shooter

Blizzard Entertainment is 25 years old this year, but the significance of that anniversary might be lost on you if you've done your gaming on console for the bulk of the last 20 years. The studio actually started life making games for the SNES and Mega Drive – *Rock 'n' Roll Racing*, *The Lost Vikings*, 1991's *Radical Psycho Machine Racing* (a more '90s title you will never find.) But then it vanished, foregoing the controller for the mouse and keyboard.

In that time, Blizzard has become one of the most important developers in the history of the PC. *Diablo* ushered in the era of the action-RPG. *Warcraft* revolutionised first the strategy game and then the MMO. *StarCraft* played a huge role in the growth of eSports and competitive gaming, turning what was once a fringe pursuit into a global enterprise. Blizzard games are expected to be well-designed and delivered to an extremely high standard of polish – it's basically the Nintendo of PC gaming, a slow but reliable generator of brilliant ideas. Now, after 25 years, that expertise is returning to console.

"We're always excited to reach as wide an audience as possible," says Blizzard's Jeff Kaplan, game director of *Overwatch*. "Every game that we start, we think about where it would be fun to play and how it would be fun to play. With *Overwatch* it was so glaringly obvious – there's such a strong shooter market on console that it was an obvious place to want to go."

Overwatch is a team-based, multiplayer-only shooter set in a comic-book interpretation of Earth's far future. Instead of classes, players choose characters that occupy one of four roles – offence, defence, tank and support – but





Cowboy, soldier, reaper, archer, robot. It's the future's answer to the Village People.

each have distinct abilities and approach the game very differently.

Winston is a rocket-powered science-ape with a lightning cannon who operates as a blocker: you get into an area, put down a shield for your team, and hold enemies at bay. Tracer is an offence character with twin submachine guns who can teleport short distances, rewind to a previous point on her own timeline, and place timed explosives. You get in, you attack somebody, you rewind, you come at them again from another angle. Tracer and Winston feel completely different to one another, but occupy the same space and synergise in ways that only grow in complexity as you become more experienced with the game's various quirks. This accounts for two characters: *Overwatch* has 21.

Despite the complexity this implies, *Overwatch* is a relatively straightforward game for Blizzard. Each of those 21 characters has clearly-defined roles and abilities and it is purely a competitive multiplayer experience. "We used our goal of being on console as a way to make the design more streamlined and hopefully more elegant," Kaplan says. "We didn't allow that PC design sensibility to overwhelm the game by having too many buttons to press, too many options. It really helped us to make it better on both platforms."



D.Va transfers her pro-gaming skills into her real-life mech.



Overwatch's backstory doesn't have much bearing on a given match, but it's present in the characters and the maps they occupy. In the future, a series of wars with evil/misunderstood robots saw the formation – and eventual dissolution – of an international band of peacekeepers, Overwatch. Now, the former members of that organisation (and a few of their previous foes) work as mercenaries. Working as a mercenary, it turns out, involves a lot of capturing control points and pushing very important carts in a variety of world locales.

There's a little Disney to *Overwatch* (particularly *Big Hero 6*), a little comic book, and a little Saturday morning cartoon. There's even a bit of *Street Fighter* in the way that the characters and maps each have a hyper-realised national identity. Tracer is British and looks at home in the gloomy future-Victorian streets of King's Row, London. Pharah is an imposing Egyptian woman in a Horus-shaped mech befitting her Temple of Anubis stomping ground. Winston is a gorilla raised in space, and, as such, the game's lack of a space-ape orphanage map seems like a bit of an oversight.

"We love shooters in all shapes and forms," Kaplan says, "and we're happy that the games that are out there exist. But we felt that there was space to do things that hadn't been done. There's a really big focus in current-generation shooters on the modern military aspect. Every man's a soldier."

Overwatch is a conscious attempt to create something a little bit lighter, he says. "Each hero is not just a class, it's a unique personality – somebody who has a nationality, a set of abilities, a back story to them. We're really trying to create a colourful, vibrant universe."

Blizzard traditionally excels at getting the details right, and that is the case here. Guns and special

Attack on Titan

Parts of *Overwatch* originated with a previous, cancelled Blizzard project – Titan. Rumoured to have been a sci-fi shooter MMO set on Earth, it's not known why the plug was pulled after years of development or how much *Overwatch* has inherited from its doomed predecessor. Blizzard has confirmed that certain maps were carried over, suggesting that the links may have been very close. Perhaps the fall and rebirth of Overwatch in the fiction is a sly nod at the game's own backstory.



powers feel great, movement is fast and responsive, and the maps – all of which follow an attack-defence format, with a few differences based on the mode you're playing – are thoughtfully designed to create natural bottlenecks.

The attention to detail goes a way beyond that, however. Environments are full of destructible objects and surprising little interactions. A stray bullet in an *Overwatch* shuttlecraft might send gas canisters skidding around the environment. Glasses and plates are blown off tables, books are scattered from shelves, railings collapse. None of this has a real impact on play, but it makes multiplayer combat feel more dynamic than it otherwise would.

Even so, Blizzard is relying entirely on the quality of the game's design to attract and retain players. That might seem like a strange distinction to make, but *Overwatch* lacks any of the features that shooters – particularly multiplayer-only shooters – use to keep players playing. When you buy the game, you will have access to all 21 characters and all of their weapons and abilities straight away. There is nothing to unlock that will meaningfully affect your experience of play. Contrast this with *Call of Duty*, *Battlefront*, or any given *Battlefield* – all games where your time investment translates into guns, attachments, unlocks, and so on.

Overwatch would not work properly if this were otherwise. It is designed so that you can switch character any time you die – and you often should, responding to the needs of your team by flipping to, say, a healer or a tank when you really need to hold that control point. If different players had access to different heroes, it simply wouldn't be fair. Blizzard's design is intricate and interdependent: in order to preserve its integrity, players need to be given all of their options up front.

Grind progress

"We felt that the progression system not affecting gameplay was core to the values behind the game," Kaplan argues. "While not everyone will play *Overwatch* competitively, protecting the competitive experience was one of the core pillars of the longevity of the game, of people respecting the game over time. We wanted to make sure that time investment didn't lead to player power."

This bears out in practice: *Overwatch* is better because it doesn't force you to grind to play with the best toys. Nonetheless, there's no arguing that *Call of Duty*-style systems work – because Skinner boxes work, grinds work, and the

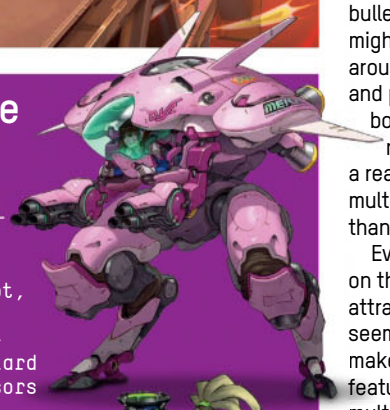
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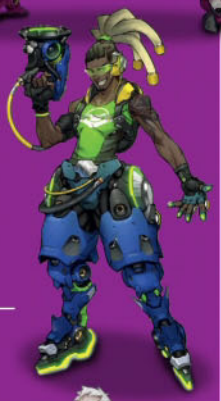
Not just a ninja – a *cyborg* ninja. Could Genji be any more impressive?

Heroes for hire

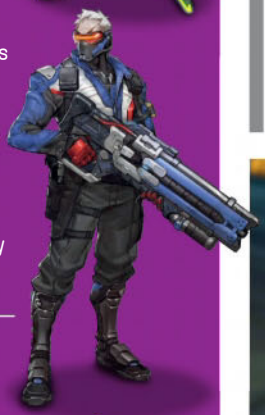
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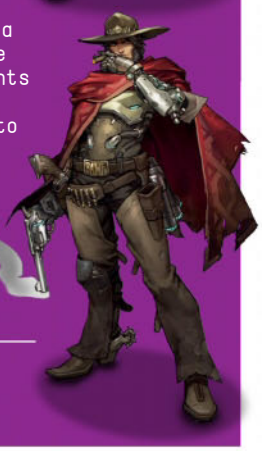
D.VA
A Korean *StarCraft* pro turned mech pilot, D.Va is a cheeky nod to Blizzard's past – there's even a Blizzard logo among the sponsors on her mech – and one of *Overwatch*'s most entertaining tanks. Her defence matrix allows her to automatically snipe enemy projectiles from the air, and she can activate her mech's self-destruct ability to set off a massive explosion before ejecting to fight on foot.



LUCIO
A Brazilian DJ and one of *Overwatch*'s support characters, he pumps out a soundtrack that either boosts his allies' speed or heals them over time, and he can instantly switch between the two. He can also wall-run using a pair of laser rollerskates. His ultimate ability involves dropping the bass – somewhat literally – in order to grant a huge shield boost to his team.



SOLDIER: 76
Designed for beginners, Soldier: 76 is a man with a gun. He can shoot a gun, shoot rockets and lay down a healing field. His ultimate ability involves what amounts to an auto-aim cheat: his gun automatically locks onto all enemies in his field of vision, allowing you to quickly take down a squad of attackers. He's a bit boring, but his job is to act as a gateway to *Overwatch*'s more inventive heroes.



MCCREE
A cowboy. He does cowboy things.



You'll need to switch players to access different skills.

vast majority of people respond to the sense of progress that an experience bar entails. That isn't always the case, mind. *Overwatch* invites comparison again with *Street Fighter* – imagine the outcry if Capcom decided that you had to be Level 11 to unlock Ryu's Dragon Punch. Blizzard wants *Overwatch* to be seen as an inviolable competitive game of that sort. But it's up against the notion that if you want a shooter community to stick around, you've got to put them on a treadmill.

Blizzard's answer is an entirely cosmetic progression system. As you play, you level up. Every time you level up, you get a loot box. Each loot box includes character-specific unlocks of varying rarities. You can get spray paint decals with which to tag the walls of the map. You can get new voice lines, skins, and poses that display on the victory screen when your team wins. You can even unlock dramatic cinematic introductions that play should you be lucky or skilled enough to score the 'Play of the Game', a highlight reel shown when a match ends.

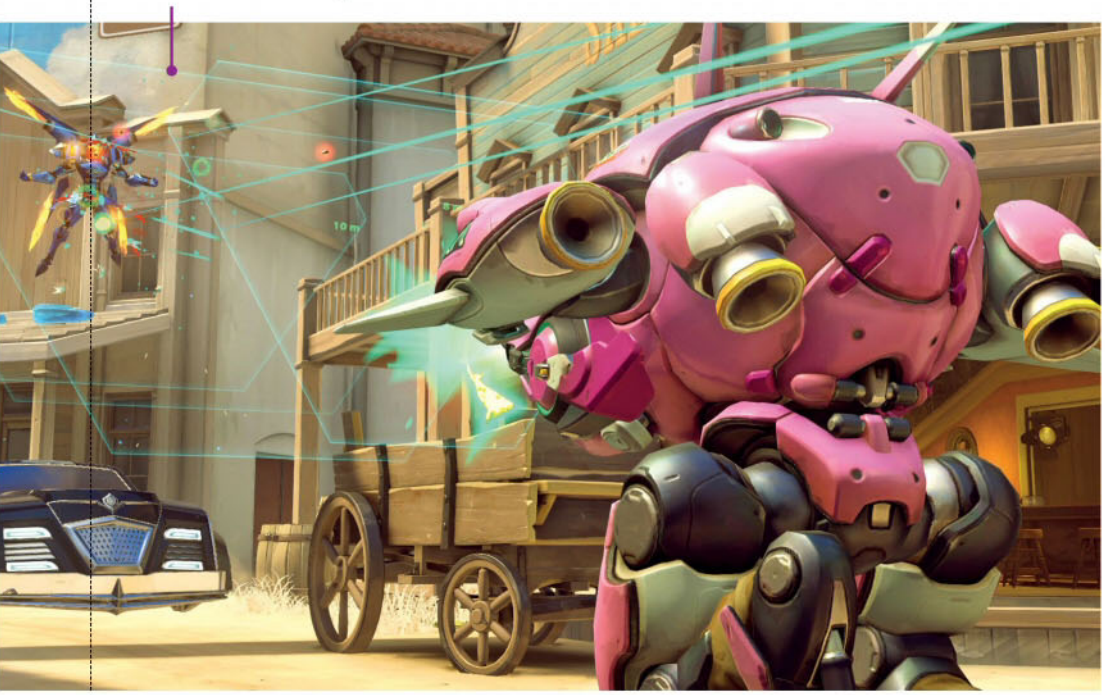
The cosmetic items are appealing, but there are question marks over their ability to retain players' interest long-term. Kaplan believes they will. "We feel like the cosmetic items are extremely appealing to players. We've seen the behaviour that it's generating in the [PC-only] beta and it's been shocking: we were really excited to add our custom game feature in this most recent beta, and we're hearing that a lot of players are dying to engage with it but not quite ready to because they can't earn loot boxes in it."

The current PC beta implies that it'll be possible to buy loot boxes and skins for real money, but Blizzard hasn't confirmed this yet. If so, it'll be a potentially divisive decision – but if it means map packs or new characters aren't for sale, then it's probably a wise move. Blizzard is trying to sidestep the community-dividing impact of unlocks, season passes, and all the accumulated business jank of the modern multiplayer shooter.

"We feel like the core gameplay of *Overwatch* should be compelling in and

> "THE REASON FOR PLAYING SHOULDN'T BE LOOT BOXES, BUT FOR THE INHERENT FUN"

All of the game's 21 characters are unlocked from the start.





A la mode

OVERWATCH IS ALWAYS PLAYED AS ATTACKERS OR DEFENDERS, BUT MAPS AND MODES EACH APPROACH THE CONCEPT DIFFERENTLY

PAYLOAD
The attackers must push a payload by standing next to it as it moves on a fixed course through the level. They're up against a time limit, but get time back on the clock by reaching checkpoints on the way. The defenders win if the time runs out. Examples include Dorado, a battle through the streets of a lantern-lit Mexican township at night.

POINT CAPTURE
The attackers must attack and capture two capture points in succession while defenders try to hold them at bay until the time runs out. This is *Overwatch*'s most straightforward format. A classic example is Volskaya Industries, which is set against the backdrop of snowbound Moscow. Gigantic mechs patrol in the distance, and the map itself ends in the innards of a robot factory.

HYBRID
These maps open with a capture point which, once controlled by the attackers, spawns a payload that has to be escorted the rest of the way. The London-set King's Row is one example, as is Numbani – a technologically-advanced Nigerian city where humans and robots have come to live in harmony.

CONTROL
In Control, both teams are on the offensive – at the start. This king of the hill-style mode involves a single capture point: hold it for long enough and your team gets a point and the map transitions to a new area where the cycle repeats. The first to two points wins. There are two control maps at present: Nepal, a monastery complex in the mountains, and Lijiang Tower, a futuristic Chinese skyscraper.









of itself," Kaplan says. "The reason for playing *Overwatch* shouldn't be whatever you get out of loot boxes, but for the inherent fun. Hopefully loot boxes and progression stand to be more of a 'thank you' on the side than a core motivator." It's a forward-thinking business decision, and one we agree with – but time will tell if ignoring the *Call of Duty* model will backfire. It'd be pretty depressing if it did.

Strike force

More broadly, Kaplan is conscious that Blizzard needs to do right by its console debut. "Making a strong first impression is extremely important for us," he says. "We've been doing a lot of outreach to get a sense of what console gamers like and dislike, so we can cater the game more towards them. We're not just treating this as a port of the PC game – it's a simultaneous development that we're taking very seriously."

This has meant assembling a 'console strike force' within Blizzard and building lines of communication with the console community. On PC, Blizzard's games have a massive built-in playerbase they can't benefit from on Xbox One, and Kaplan notes the difference. "The PC crowd is very vocal, very outspoken, they use a lot of different forms of social media to make their voice heard. For the most part console players have been very positive and respectful. They just seem to play and enjoy their games, which is somewhat refreshing."

The ongoing PC beta test has provided Blizzard with platform-agnostic feedback on game balance,

Death is inevitable, but use it to your advantage by switching to a character that may better help your team.

characters and features that work well or badly, and so on. Even so, Kaplan anticipates that the two versions will diverge eventually. "Currently, if you play the Xbox version of the game it's exactly the same as the PC version," he says. "We're planning to do some tuning and balancing changes based on things like analogue turn rate." A public beta test for the Xbox version hasn't been confirmed, but Kaplan mentions it as a possibility.

A few months out from its June release date, *Overwatch* is already a good game. We've had more fun with the beta than with any other competitive shooter released in the last year short of *Rainbow Six Siege*. Its reception on console will be enormously important for Blizzard, and perhaps even for the shooter as a whole: this game is positioned better than any other to prove that shooters don't need single-player campaigns and lengthy grinds, that a full-priced multiplayer game can earn its asking price on the quality of its design alone. If it succeeds, an entire genre stands to benefit. If it fails, well – Blizzard will always have *World of Warcraft*. ■

A new universe

Overwatch isn't just significant for being the first game that Blizzard has designed for console in 20 years – it's also the first new fictional universe it has created in about the same amount of time. The *Warcraft*, *StarCraft* and *Diablo* franchises have been extensively explored in games, books and comics – *Warcraft* is even becoming a feature film in June. *Overwatch* is a long way from achieving the same level of awareness.

Updating...



92%

Your love of Xbox will increase following magazine upgrade

NEW LOOK OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE ON SALE 8 APRIL

CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE. BEYOND ALL RECOGNITION.

REVIEWS

The most important Xbox releases rated



FAR CRY PRIMAL

Having a yabba dabba doo time (p70)

THIS MONTH IN FACTS

FAR CRY PRIMAL VERSUS THE STONE AGE

	FCP	SA
Hunting and gathering	Yes	Yes
Cave Paintings	Plenty	Plenty
Magic owls	Sure!	?

WHAT'S THE SCARIEST PAINTING YOU'VE EVER SEEN?

Alex: Probably the one in my attic that stops me ageing

Matthew: The Mona Lisa has the smile of a killer. Trust me. I would know

Emma: I don't work here anymore, stop asking me dumb questions

Tom: Any self-portrait

MOST TERRIFYING ZOMBIE GAMES OF THE MONTH

— 4 —

Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare 2

— 3 —

The Walking Dead: Michonne

— 2 —

Dying Light: The Following

— 1 —

Unravel:Yarny Wants Your Brains Edition

THIS MONTH WE...



Encouraged reckless driving p74



Screamed at art p76



Feared the red devil p78



Hulk smashed p82



Went Russian around p84



Fire plus stick equals... probably not a very terrifying prospect for that massive mammoth.



PUBLISHER UBISOFT / **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL
FORMAT XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

FAR CRY PRIMAL

Exploring early-man sandbox like a rolling Flintstone

The first and only line of English dialogue occurs at the start of *Far Cry Primal*. A telephone rings and a woman answers. Then, underneath the frothy buzz of traffic and dense crowd rumblings, years displayed in stark white numbers roll back like a Rolodex. Back and back they go until they hit 10,000 BC, a simpler time in which long-distance communication involved shouting, cars were mammoths, and the most advanced technology available to you was fire. It's an exotic setting completely removed from contemporary trappings, and it would be the series' most blissful yet were it not for all the things that want to skin you alive.

Stone Age Europe makes an utterly picturesque locale for *Far Cry*'s fifth game, one in which man's only visible trace is the odd cave painting or weird arrangement of rocks. By day, roaming deer bound through sunny fields of rippling grass, and butterflies dart through crystal clear air. By night, flickering fireflies dance below gleaming constellations, trees cast lurching silhouettes in streaming moonlight, and ominous pairs of glinting eyes watch hungrily from the darkness. Here you'll craft weapons, conquer outposts, and hunt rare species. Again.

While you no longer need fear revving jeeps or rattling guns, there are a whole new set of everyday problems, like packs of snarling wolves darting from bushes, prompting a panicked realisation that all you've got to defend yourself with is a large stick. The stick is the caveman equivalent of modern-day life insurance, it seems, only your 21st century policy would never give you splinters. Nature is a much bigger threat than man here.

Savage garden

That said, there's safety in numbers. After protagonist Takkar loses his companions, he establishes a village which gradually expands as he recruits settlers – a process that accelerates slightly when the cannibalistic Udam tribe make their presence violently known. *Primal*'s about visiting the yellow-ringed icons of Cro-Magnon-browed mission-givers on a map that takes us from biting wintry wastes to bone-dry deserts as we try to help them.

Take, for example, idiotic inventor Urki who inexplicably speaks with a Southern accent like some kind of Louisiana Tarzan. Upon finding him fruitlessly throwing a bird at a wall in an effort to try and understand the power of flight, he asks you to hunt down snowbird feathers and a tortoise carapace in order to construct wings. Do so and he proceeds to leap off a cliff with them flapping madly before predictably smacking into the ground. Two failed inventions later involving 'rock skin' that evidently doesn't do anything to stop the spear Urki asks you to throw, and 'stink skin' that doesn't ward off wild animals who promptly maul him, he pays your enabling ways by settling in your growing village. When he's stopped writhing in pain, naturally.



REVIEWER
BEN GRIFFIN
Live Benjamin Three
@GameGriffin

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
A sandbox adventure before the time of iPhones and regular phones.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Far Cry with spears, sabre-tooths and snazzy fur pants.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Anyone who's ever had a non-ironic first-world problem.

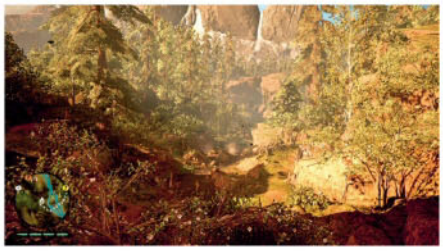
Pets at home

Upgrading huts by collecting building materials such as reeds, stone and wood, unlocks its dweller's missions. Jayma is all about hunting legendary beasts like the bloodtusk mammoth whose reign of terror you must end by shooting down ice shelves on its head, whereas one-eyed warrior Karoosh's tasks are more combat-focused. Shaman Tensay's are the highlight, pouring unspeakable concoctions of rat blood and eyeballs down your gullet to alter your mental state and put you in the bodies of soaring owls and rampaging mammoths. In one mission you have to lead your herd to safety by smashing wooden pens and knocking tribesmen flying with flails of your trunk. They're effective palette cleansers and great ways to introduce ludicrous scenarios without contradicting internal rules (an objective during one psychedelic trip is 'use arrows to destroy the moon').

Characters are larger than life. Karoosh introduces himself with a brain-shaking headbutt, Sayla wears the ears of enemies around her neck to silence screams in her head, and engineer Wogah angrily wees on you. Well-choreographed first-person cinematics place you in their world, and their personalities drive the unique



Aww, is this the face of something that'd try to horribly murder you? Yes. Yes it is.







» skills they teach, like Karoosh's ability to chain takedowns and throw sharpened rocks, Wogah's grappling hook that snaps onto fixed points in the environment, and Sayla's method of blending leaves and meat into health-giving, speed-boosting, poison-resisting potions. It's the tried-and-tested *Far Cry* framework transplanted to a different time and place, and while it's admirable Ubisoft found a way to incorporate absurdities like bee bombs and owls that drop bee bombs in not-completely-unrealistic fashion (hey, it could happen), the ancient setting does prove restrictive. Don't expect to find wingsuits, grenades, ATVs, or choppers. Obviously.

Caveman on fire

As a result there's increased emphasis on crafting. The materials required for making and upgrading equipment means getting your hands dirty. Clay, rock dust, animal hides, slate, flint, feathers, bone – you need the lot, and since you rarely stumble upon ready-made weapons, much of your time is spent constantly grabbing and picking and digging for their base components, activating your alternate vision mode to identify important items painted bright yellow (this is easy to overuse) then lashing them together to make spears, arrows and clubs. It's like a candy land to pillage at leisure, only after a while you sort of hunger for a sit-down ready meal.

Projectiles are an especially precious commodity; losing them means having to gather twigs in order to carve more, giving combat an urgent pace. *Primal* refreshingly diverts from long-distance spray-and-pay firefights of old to teeth-bearing close-up clashes, and outpost assaults in particular feel new again. In one by a crocodile-lined river we creep behind a clifftop scout and quietly snap his neck, then headshot another with a spear before retrieving it. Stealth indicators and radar facilitate stealth without breaking immersion, and when it does go south there are plan Bs: ignite a club and set the entire camp on fire in a propagation celebration, throw bait to lure apex predators, or use your very own domesticated beast.

Yes, in *Primal* you can roll with wolves, lions, bears, sabre-tooths, and bloodthirsty badgers who, it has to be said, are proper gits. Drop hunks of meat to distract them, approach slowly, hold X to pet their soft heads, and they'll misguidedly follow you. Pay

The dreaded bloodtusk mammoth is a total spear sponge.

Your village soon becomes a hotspot filled with annoying kids and hipster bongo men.





Animal Harm

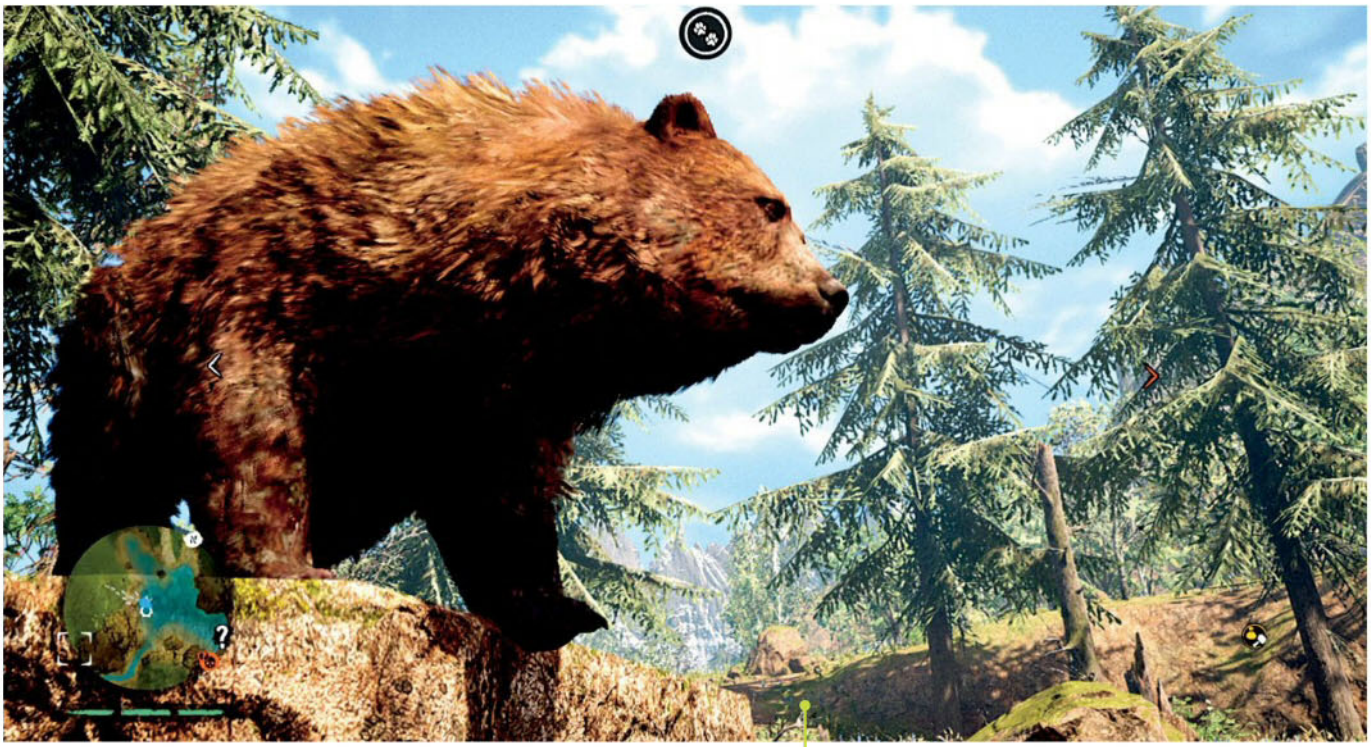
Primal's animal list is extensive: snakes, monkeys, tortoises, woolly rhino, elk, boar, eagles, wolves, yak, brown bear, cave bear, mammoth, jaguar, lion, sabre-tooth tiger and the dreaded badger. There are rare variations, like white wolves, and you can kill and skin everything. That bait bag won't craft itself.

Character-introducing cutscenes are a highlight. God they're weird.









Cave bears are one of the game's toughest tameable beasts. Look at its soft fur, please.

"Honesty, would you rather drive a sabre-tooth tiger or a Fiat Punto?"

that loyalty back by using LT and RB to make them pounce on whatever you're aiming at, such as fire. You can summon your choice from a menu: jaguars chase down smaller, quicker foes while bears fare better in heavyweight showdowns. Whistling for our cave bear, Jonathan, we ambush a herd of mammoths, spearing one in the face with flaming arrows as fur flies. Learn Tensay's beast rider skill and you can even hop on larger creatures, which instantly makes you forget about the lack of vehicles. We've hitched rides with speedy big cats to flee cackling dogs and trampled poisonous snakes on baby mammoths. Honestly, what would you rather drive, a sabre-tooth tiger or a Fiat Punto?

That's not to say *Primal* is always a prime cut – there are absolutely rotten bits here. Like having to fight three leopards in a dark cave. You're either bashing them up the arse or frantically pressing Y to heal while they slash repeatedly. Melee combat is desperate and impactful but lacks nuance without the ability to block or dodge, and jabbing spears at heads like insta-death sticks proves depressingly effective. Multi-person brawls, meanwhile, resemble one of those elaborate grandfather clocks where figures emerge and chase each other in circles. Oh, and there's one *balls* beast master mission in which you fight woolly spirit rhinos attacking simultaneously in a narrow passage, and your only attack has a lengthy cool-down. We beat it through sheer cheese, dropping down to a rocky overhang and mauling their fat ankles.

Goofball antics come with the territory of being able to throw exploding balls of bees. And for the most part *Primal* pulls it off, staying true to the caveman fantasy without going overboard. You can't, for instance, ride a crocodile or make a gun out of coconuts. While it doesn't feel as grand or essential as past games, the spectacular Mesolithic setting is another stellar frontier that's brutal, beguiling and absolutely begging to be tamed. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

KEY INFLUENCES



50% *10,000 BC*
25% *The Flintstones*
25% *Far Cry 3*

COOLEST CHARACTER



SHAMAN TENSAY
Offers gruesome potions to teach you beast master skills, which mostly involves pretending you're a mammoth.

DID YOU KNOW?

The language spoken in *Primal* is made up but not gibberish. Words are consistent, so you could learn it if you wanted to.

OVERALL

Lacking a map-editor, co-op and charismatic villain, *Primal* sacrifices its forebears' 'big event' status, but this back-to-basics approach makes for an all-natural off-the-reservation romp.

7

Rage quitting will ban you from online multiplayer for 15 minutes. Time enough for an angry nap or finishing that ham in your fridge.



PUBLISHER PSYONIX / **DEVELOPER** PSYONIX / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

ROCKET LEAGUE

Cars and football combined? It's rocket science



REVIEWER
SAMUEL ROBERTS
Live samamwel
@samuelwroberts

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
Rocket-powered novelty football, mostly played online, but offline if you insist.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Easy to learn, wonderful to control and oh-so-dramatic the more you play.

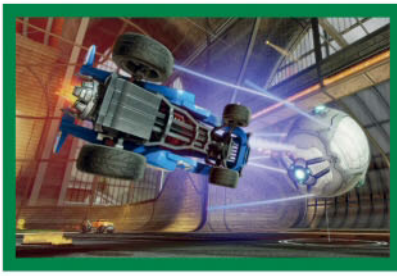
WHO'S IT FOR?
People who like football and/or cars. Also: people who like neither.

Rocket League was the phenomenon of the summer on other formats, and here it saunters onto Xbox One late, bringing a token gift basket of *Halo* and *Gears of War* cosmetics to make up for the delay. This rocket-powered football car game is easy to pick up and enjoy, with instantly satisfying 3D movement but loads to master over tens more hours.

Even if you've no love for football, cars or the prospect of a dystopian sci-fi future where the two have been recklessly combined, *Rocket League* offers potentially hundreds of hours of fast-paced, gratifying multiplayer on your Xbox. With up to three other players, your objective is to poke an enormous bouncy ball into the other team's net using a car that can boost, jump and destroy other cars at speed, and the team with the most goals in five minutes wins. There are no throw-ins or corners because each pitch is an enclosed space with walls and a ceiling – deflections, then, are a key part of any team's strategy. The two sides battle it out across a number of fancy Unreal Engine 4-powered arenas: there's a towering futuristic cityscape, a giant colosseum and even a *Mad Max*-esque wasteland.

While you can opt to play by yourself in 1v1, the real essence of *Rocket League* comes in the 2v2 and 3v3 variants of the game. The pitches are just a bit too big for one player to effectively defend their turf as well as scoring in the other net, while 4v4 is so busy it's almost impossible to land a clean shot without a sea of cars flying towards you. With other players, you can switch up your tactics on the fly depending on where your cars are positioned. Some people you encounter will be ball hogs or goal hangers, others will act diligently as goalkeepers. Like real football, there's a degree of self-expression on the field that makes every match a little bit different and thrilling. Later, you learn to combine the boost with the jump button to perform daring and impressively angled shots in mid-air – that, or you'll just miss the damn ball and embarrass yourself in front of the other team (always the latter, almost never the former). There are more failed stuntmen in *Rocket League*'s online multiplayer than at Cirque Du Soleil tryouts.

Learning these fancier moves is how you feel yourself progressing in *Rocket League*, however. It's not a game where your car gets special abilities. All the upgrades are cosmetic. Garish decals, obnoxious musical exhausts and funny hats for your vehicle aside, you're always driving something exactly as good as everyone else, meaning that the game is perfectly balanced, the



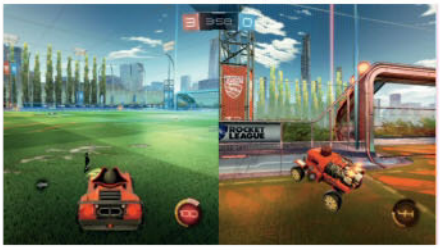
'Nice shot!'

Interactions with other players are helped by the game's brilliantly well-judged default text chat commands. While it's nice to congratulate the other team with 'nice shot!' every now and then, the same phrase becomes salt in the wound when they've just scored an absolute howler of an own goal.

If the online games prove infuriating you can play four-man split-screen. It's the same game, but with a chance for giving dead arms.









If the clock reaches zero and it's a draw, the game goes into sudden death.

"A perfect competitive game if you don't necessarily like playing online"

occasional headache with lag aside. The shape of your car has a small effect in terms of hitbox positioning, whether you opt for a sporty saloon, monster truck or a van. The difference is marginal, however, though a van is inarguably funnier wearing a top hat.

Getting the hang of controlling the car feels fantastic. The first time you drive up the side of a wall, jump off at an angle and precisely nudge the ball into a perfect setup from above is thrilling, and it won't take too long to get that good. The excellent tutorials and optional offline modes with only sporadically awake bots help with that, too. With no real air resistance on the car, it's like controlling a zippy RC vehicle.

It's a perfect competitive game for people who don't necessarily like playing online. With matches lasting five minutes, the time commitment isn't too demanding, and the matchmaking is so fast that you're normally revving up within moments of switching the game on. Don't expect a Career mode or anything like that, but the Ranked mode offers plenty of long-term motivation to keep playing, though the pairings you end up with in ranked often feel a bit mismatched in terms of skill. The important thing is to find one or two other players in your friends list who can help create goals over voice chat, partners who know when to arrive in the box and tuck the ball in the back of the net.

Rocket League is just so effective at stirring drama in the player, from the feedback of the car to the explosion that greets every goal and sends the cars flying through the air. Some of the most rewarding experiences I've had in online multiplayer have involved sinking eight goals in Ranked then watching the other team desperately try and salvage the match. While in contrast, losing 4-3 in injury time off the back of a miraculous 3-0 comeback has resulted in some of my angriest naps in living memory.

That's because Psyonix has created an incredible football game that perfectly rewards good teamwork, and quietly taunts you into getting better at your lowest moments. Touches like freezing the clock at zero and not letting it time out until the ball hits the ground again keeps everyone invested down to the final moments. It makes each sensible strategic decision feel heroic in a way that's hard to capture in a normal, busier football game. And that's the magic of *Rocket League*. This takes a simple idea but brings it to life in a way that empowers every great touch of the ball you make. It's unmissable. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

PROS/CONS

- ✔ Wonderful to control
- ✔ One of the best co-op games around
- ✔ Fast matchmaking
- ✖ Ranking system is hard to figure out
- ✖ Occasional lag is a factor
- ✖ Random teammates are often awful

THE BEST BIT



Being promoted into another division after working your arse off for it.

DID YOU KNOW?

Rocket League is actually the sequel to a 2008 PS3 title *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars.*

OVERALL

One of the best sports games on Xbox One, even if car football isn't really a sport. A simple multiplayer game that can make you feel like both a champion and a failure within 10 minutes.

9





Paintings are designed to catch your eye, so that the designers can switch things up behind you.



Between 'levels', you'll watch your painting evolve as you lose more of your mind.



PUBLISHER BLOOBER / **DEVELOPER** BLOOBER / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

LAYERS OF FEAR

Goya in the foyer, Titian in the kitchen, terror everywhere



REVIEWER
JOE SKREBELS
Live OXM Joe
@2plus2isjoe

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
A psychological horror about a more-than-tortured artist.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
It's *P.T.* set in the architecture of the Overlook Hotel.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Anyone with a strong constitution, or romantic-era art enthusiasts.

There's a painting somewhere deep in the house. On first glance, it's a family scene, rarefied and austere, but pleasant enough. Turn around, then back for a second glance, and you'll find it changed. Colours have warped, the figures now drooping like a reflection in disturbed water. The black flecks of the children's eyes drip down to the frame and, oddest of all, five tendrils of brown reach for each of their necks. It's as if the painting's switched from a picnic scene to a hanging.

This is everything *Layers of Fear* does well, in microcosm. The story of a haunted artist wandering his seemingly abandoned mansion in search of the grim means to finish a masterwork, the game's devious hook is the way it warps the world around you. Or, more accurately, behind you. At best, you get only peripheral flashes of its entwining architecture, a flicker announcing some benign yet unsettling change.

It's haunting in the truest sense of the word – rarely outright jumpy, but creeping and archly Gothic in a way games rarely allow themselves to be. It makes you smile at its tricks as much as cower from them – sometimes that's the point. That's when it gets you.

A rich, gruesome little story lies between all the visual trickery, spatters of puzzle gameplay stopping this from becoming a simple ghost train, and some standout set-pieces – brilliant bits of spatial thinking where ceilings become impossibly tall in an instant, or gravity forgets itself when a piano begins to play – making for a game that almost always feel sharp.

There are missteps. The game's one recurring jump scare isn't just cheap, it's ripped wholesale from Hideo Kojima's *P.T.,* and framerates as hideous as some of those twisted paintings lurk at each end of the game, disrupting the experience of exploration. But this doesn't ruin it. *Layers of Fear*'s devs play their role masterfully – not just designers, but malevolent ghosts to the player's unwitting horror film victim. They toy with you, prod you where they want you to go, spook you and set you on a new course. They're almost supernaturally talented at altering your world without you ever being quite aware of the changes until they've occurred. All you know is that *they're behind you*. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

THE RIVALS

- RESIDENT EVIL ZERO HD 7
- OXENFREE 7
- WHITE NIGHT 5

2ND OPINION



"In an oversaturated market of first-person horror, *Layers of Fear* is a shining beacon of terrifying hope. A masterclass in scares and unpredictability, it's far from paint by numbers. Prepare to jump a lot. And swear."
LOUISE BLAIN, GAMESRADAR+

COMPLETION CLOCK

4 HOURS

OVERALL

Smart, spooky and psychedelic, this thrusts you into its story, whirls you about and leaves you dizzy. You'll hate and enjoy your stay in equal measures – in the best possible way.

9

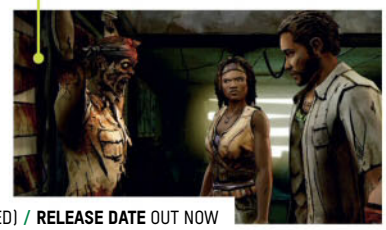
Walkers are child's play for the ever-capable Michonne, but human adversaries prove more morally troublesome.







Michonne gets plenty of alone time with Pete, but they're still feeling each other out.



PUBLISHER TELLTALE GAMES / **DEVELOPER** TELLTALE GAMES / **FORMAT** XBOX 360, XBOX ONE (REVIEWED) / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

THE WALKING DEAD: MICHONNE EP1: IN TOO DEEP

Is it finally time to flake on Telltale's Walking Dead series?



REVIEWER

ALEX DALE
Live ChocoboOfDoom
SporadicDaler

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
The Walking Dead spin-off starring the TV series' cleave-happy Michonne.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Far more brutal, visceral and brooding than the oft-optimistic main series.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Even Michonne-maniacs will struggle to get much sap from this small stump of backstory.

With its suffocating blend of action, violence, fear, foreboding, anguish, politics, betrayal and repose, *The Walking Dead* universe slots as nicely into Telltale's interactive storytelling template as a machete into a walker's eye socket. But never underestimate the role young Clementine plays in holding the series together. A calm oasis of reason in a world of dangerously short fuses, she's the emotional anchor that tethers us to that world, and makes our decisions feel like they *matter*. That's a tough act for any heroine to follow, particularly one as street-tough as the machete-wielding, manky-ass-kicking star of this three-episode spin-off, Michonne.

Having said that, as fans of the TV series and comic will know, Michonne suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, the reasons for which are addressed here in the form of harrowing flashbacks. After these revealing glimpses into her psyche, Michonne's open book slams shut and her makeshift posse spend much of the rest of the episode attempting to wrench it open again.

Episode 1 is an exposition-packed slow-burner – almost worryingly so given that this is just a three-parter – but it's not short of violence. In fact, it revels in it in a way that Clementine's story arc tended to shy away from, which does give it its own feel, but sometimes the drama can get lost in a whirlwind of Hollywood swordplay.

As the plot thickens and tension rises, *In Too Deep* attempts to repeat *The Walking Dead*'s intoxicating rhythm of emotional peaks and troughs, but it largely falls flat. The cast is comprised of overfamiliar tropes (optimistic leader, misanthropic loner) and the plot twist, too, is a rehash of one already survived in the main series. Also, neither the choices you make nor the words you choose have much impact. Even the episode-ending cliffhanger is as weak as your boat's radio signal.

There's still time for Telltale to turn this vessel around, but it's also problematic that we already know Michonne's fate. Michonne could slice Clementine to ribbons, sure, but we'd prefer to have Clem in our group any day of the week. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

COOLEST CHARACTER



Michonne – who else? It's impossible not to root for her, but the rest of your posse are wetter than a puppy's wet blanket.

KEY INFLUENCES



70% *The Walking Dead*
20% *Kill Bill*
10% *The Deer Hunter*

DID YOU KNOW?

Michonne is voiced by Samira Wiley, who plays Poussey Washington in Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*.

OVERALL

It's easy to accredit the success of Telltale's original *Walking Dead* series to the strength of the fiction it's working with, but this flat opening salvo lacks the same nuances.

5





It's often a very lonely game. Would it kill granny to knit Yarny a buddy?



Yarny's grounded trek is broken up by mad dashes across air and water.



PUBLISHER EA / **DEVELOPER** COLDWOOD INTERACTIVE / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

UNRAVEL

Purled platformer adds new meaning to woolly jumper



REVIEWER
MATTHEW CASTLE
Live OXM Pesto
@mrbasil_pesto

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
Puzzle platformer set in the countryside of northern Sweden.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Limbo with added grappling hooks, as knitted by your grandma.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Reasonably tricky platforming means it's not as kiddy as it looks.

Happiness blossoms from small, simple things. The first words we see in *Unravel*, inscribed in Coldwood's native Swedish, set the tone for a game that sees huge potential in the mundane. Not only is its hero a weedy scrap of ever-unspooling wool, but his tiny size recasts the detritus of everyday life as an epic landscape. You'll skim oceans (ponds), shatter a gate with a battering ram (a child's tricycle) and escape a bombing run (some mardy crows). It's a brilliant rejection of platformer cliché.

Exceptional visual design hides a more conservative physics-based puzzle platformer, not unlike *Limbo* in its focus on dragging and pushing objects into place. The ability to string up elastic platforms adds a fun twist to the gymnastics (both the physical and mental kind), and there's an ingenious (literal) snag in the way Yarny unravels with every step. Taking overlong routes or getting tangled on needless tethers sees him disintegrate into a wheezing skeleton. I've always thought there's something of the Devil about this red, horned creature; with his grim, knotted ribcage exposed he's truly worthy of Dante's Inferno. All the more reason to keep that body intact, I guess.

Alas, puzzles can also begin to look threadbare. Designers over-rely on a few formulas – there's a lot of pushing blocks up tightropes – while teasing us with glimpses of other, smarter ideas. Smaller set-pieces built around snowball making, cockroach scaring or powering up ancient machinery show bursts of innovation that need meatier segments to shine. Brevity lends the game its gambolling pace, but it could do with more lightbulb moments of inspiration. Chewier problems are usually due to you failing to realise an object could be moved (the rules are hazy) or because you overlooked a microscopic grappling point.

But it is an easy game to forgive, thanks in part to Coldwood's charming presence. From a personalised thank you note on the title screen to landscapes torn from their own back yards, it's a sincere team effort (not to mention a technical marvel for such a small group). Annoyance may blossom from small, miserly mistakes, but most of it evaporates under the million-watt glare of Coldwood's good intentions. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

KEY INFLUENCES



70% Limbo
15% Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons
15% Springwatch

THE BEST BIT



Hidden buttons challenge your grasp of Yarny's powers and add some replayability.

COMPLETION CLOCK

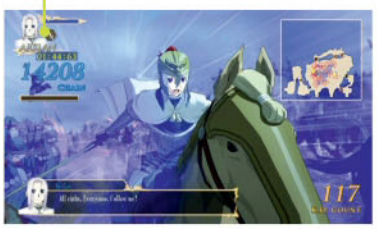


OVERALL

Simple ideas knit into a beautiful platformer, if one that's too reliant on a few tricks to earn it essential status. We expect even greater things from Coldwood in the future.







Arslan here is our hero, a displaced and virtuous prince. He's pretty dull, really.



The *Warriors* series' ludicrous special moves at least put in an appearance.



PUBLISHER KOEI TECMO / **DEVELOPER** OMEGA FORCE / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

ARSLAN: THE WARRIORS OF LEGEND

What a load of Ars



REVIEWER
JOE SKREBELS
Live OXM Joe
@2plus2isjoe

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
A hack 'n' slash anime spin-off from the *Dynasty Warriors* series.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Other *Warriors* games, but without most of the good stuff.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Ultra-fans, and those who desperately require anaesthetic.

The *Dynasty Warriors* games are proof of the enduring appeal of quantity over quality. They are, at their best, above-average action games, but come so stuffed with characters, battles, mystical weapons, modes and cool hats that fans return again and again to the same template they've been playing since 2000. So explain to us why this anime-associated spin-off is so lacking.

Arslan draws much from its source content – it plays out the same fantasy-medieval origin story as the 2015 anime, uses its animation team for cutscenes, and utilises its in-jokes for game mechanics. But with only 15 playable characters, a single campaign and a whole bunch of level re-use, it's a distinctly budget proposition, without the price tag to match.

The basic setup is route-one *Warriors:* you control one soldier on a battlefield, killing hundreds of AI fodder using a single combo string while also moving and conquering the battlefield. Without multiple campaigns or secret hypothetical scenarios to unlock, this really is about all there is to it: slash, slash, cutscene, slash boss, victory.

Rush Zones are a nice idea, glowing points on the battlefield that suddenly give you command of a whole regiment, letting you effortlessly hack through enemy formations and rack up 10,000 hit combos in seconds. Unfortunately, their use is almost exclusively "point in this direction to progress", so any sudden interest in tactical battling is killed immediately. It also has the deadening habit of giving recharging shields to bosses enemies, making what should be the most exciting encounters drag out for minutes.

All but the most hardened *Warriors/ Arslan* fans would do well to avoid this – those fans will, respectively, have played far better *Warriors* games and know the entire plot from start to finish. The only part of *Warriors'* obsession with quantity we can't endorse is the vast number of spin-offs the series is producing, leading to sloppy efforts like this. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

BETTER THAN...



FIST OF THE NORTH STAR: KEN'S RAGE 2
Arslan at least represents how *Dynasty Warriors* can work on current gen – without all of *Fist of the North Star*'s horrible technical issues, basically.

WORSE THAN...



DYNASTY WARRIORS 8
But even without technical issues, *Arslan* is one of the poorest *Warriors* games for some time. The core series has never been better than in its last outing – hopefully we'll get a full sequel soon.

COMPLETION CLOCK

10 HOURS

OVERALL

Under-featured and poorly conceived, this won't appeal to fans of the *Warriors* games, while Arslan fans (Arsheads?) are better off rewatching the original anime series.

4

Nuke Juice, eh? Can't be any worse than a smoothie – those things are loaded with sugar.



PUBLISHER EA / **DEVELOPER** POPCAP / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW



REVIEWER
MATTHEW CASTLE
Live 0XM Pesto
@mrbasil_pesto

PLANTS VS ZOMBIES: GARDEN WARFARE 2

Previous failings are weeded out in this spry ghoul reunion

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
It's plant brood vs plant food as plants and zombies clash in an eternal war.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Third-person shooter with its own goofy takes on multiplayer staples such as Horde and Rush.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Kids yet to be corrupted by *Call of Duty*. Adults hoping to regain their lost innocence.

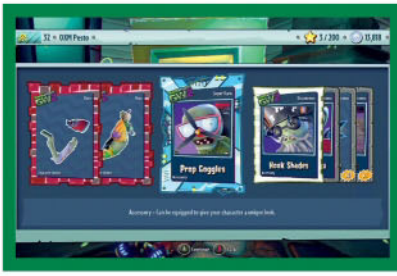
Garden Warfare 2 has a cool trick to disperse the red mist of an online death: its cast are so dumb-looking, you can't stay angry. Ever tried flinging an f-bomb at a sunflower? Or insulting the parents of an undead construction worker? It can't be done. Spite cannot survive in the face of such silliness.

What do you expect from the world's friendliest third-person shooter? Foes aren't killed but "vanquished". Your own fallen body is shown with eyes dopily swivelling in the sockets. Even the killcam jollies up an impersonal war by keeping tally of your killcount (sorry, *vanquish count*) against every attacker. Learning that an undead pirate is 3-0 up on your rose witch lets you enjoy a head-to-head grudge match amidst the chaos. This isn't to say the game lacks urgency – you'll fight as hard to protect a giant comedy tombstone as you would a *Battlefield* control point – but losses don't smart quite as much.

It's a game that prefers heroic victory to the aggressive domination preached by most shooters. Success is met with a burst of cheery energy, whether it's setting off fireworks by holding all capture points in Surburbination mode, or the spray of treasure from a flagpole when you repel a wave of enemies. Even individual kills are celebrated with a comedy *pop!* sound effect. Get a spree going and it resembles microwave popcorn – doubly so when it's living corn cobs you're frazzling. Our favourite touch is the jaunty whistling as plants seize a control point – a spot of Colonel Bogey March-like motivation to push you over the finish line.

Much of this goes for the original, so is there enough to justify a return to the trenches? For starters, *GW2* arrives with a spread of modes it took several DLC packs for *GW1* to amass. It also doubles up by offering the zombies' view of events. So Garden Ops' Horde-like mode is matched in Graveyard Ops, and Garden and Graves, *PvZ*'s answer to *Battlefield*'s Rush, is mirrored in Herbal Assault. Forcing a zombie retreat may not sound mechanically revolutionary, but it's fun to play attacker with the usually put-upon plants and to see zombies put those much-hungered-for brains to a tactical defence.

New characters play into the armies' diversified roles. In Kernel Corn, the plants get a great projectile character, rattling off five-a-day death, while Rose holds the line with a time-slowing gas and goat-morphing magic (not an instant win, as said billy can then headbutt you). Citron's ability to roll in a defensive peel shell is more useful in objective-led modes and so a bit weedy in a defensive line, but he gets a pass for being a bounty hunter orange from the future. Zombies, previously

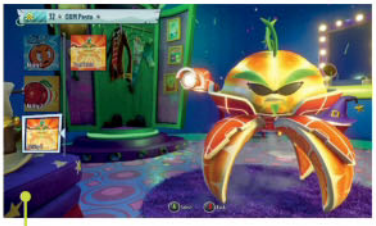


Sticky situation

Fighting earns coins, which buy stickers granting support items, cosmetic goods and new heroes. Good news: real money isn't involved and coins flow freely – you can buy a new hero every 90 minutes. The downside is tying consumable AI soldiers and turrets to stickers: both add complexity; pity they run out so fast.

Who needs weed killer when you've got cannonballs? Might wreck the lawn, mind.





In a film of *GW2*, this guy would be played by Val Kilmer. Got the jowls for it.







Prepare to whittle down health bars when boss characters arrive in the story or Ops mode.

"Who wouldn't want to be a bounty hunting orange from the future?"

the more conservative of the two sides, get a dose of variety from the whirlwind fists of Super Brainz and a tiny Imp who pathetically nips at health bars as he charges up his devastating mech.

New classes dominate online games right now – who wouldn't be curious to play as a bounty hunting orange from the future? – but both sides are clearly better balanced for offence/defence. You're encouraged to experiment with new roles, further differentiating *GW2* from multiplayer rivals that encourage fierce investment in building a super soldier. Here characters level so fast that they can max out and "prestige" in two hours. Don't worry about longevity, though, as they need to be maxed out five times to unlock upgrades (a spot of personalisation missing in *GW1*), and there are a huge 110 class variations to take through the process.

Crucially, it's a sense of progression that was missing in *GW1*. Everything you do, from slogging out a half-hour Herbal Assault victory to beheading a lone zombie stumbling around the hubworld, edges you towards another tick on *GW2*'s ludicrous checklist. This is before you factor in quests overlaid on day-to-day play (get X kills with a certain hero, etc), or tackle a story mode built from bot-filled matches, or simply explore a hubworld that brings all the options together in a living, if wartorn, menu screen. After a year of the likes of *Battlefront* and *Rainbow Six Siege* offering vanilla packages around sound multiplayer action, *GW2* certainly feels more substantial.

Of course, no amount of dressing, even with PopCap's Pixar-esque sheen, can carry mediocre action. Admirable as it is to zig against the military shooters' zag, it's undeniable that replacing the precise sting of lead with the broad cartoon splat of a pea just won't gel with some people. It actually has a similar flavour to *Star Wars Battlefront*: respawns are quick, and most problems are solved by throwing a wave of expendable bodies at it. *GW2*'s clearly defined class roles and their sprinkling of upgrades arguably make it the deeper shooter, but if you're coming to it from *Battlefield 4* or *Siege*, it can appear to be a dumb bunfight.

It's tricky to see exactly who *Garden Warfare 2* is for, then, but no denying how hard it works for that unknowable player. Whether you're on a detox from simulated man-murder or just seek to sink into a fug of XP-fuelled dopamine hits, there's a lot of fun to be had. And hey, at the very least you know you can prevent hateful teens teabagging you – just play as a cactus. Oof. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

COOLEST CHARACTER



CAPTAIN DEADBEARD
Plants can survive his short-range shotgun, but he can ride rodeo on a cannon and fly a drone-like parrot.

KEY INFLUENCES



50% Star Wars Battlefront
25% Night of the Living Dead
25% Chelsea Flower Show

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

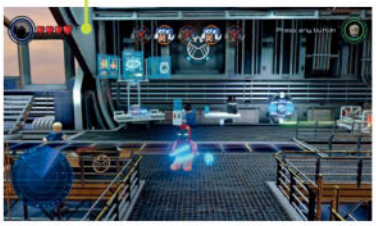
PopCap attempts to keep the online lobbies busy by offering free content updates. We like this trend.

OVERALL

Under the cheery looks is a surprisingly gripping shooter that, second time round, offers a healthier spread of modes and an addictive breadcrumb trail of hero progression.

8





Create-a-hero finally gives us the pink-armed glowstick-waving Iron Man of our dreams.



Hurrah! Toys finally include Black Widow! Shown here, er, cleaning up...



PUBLISHER WARNER BROS / **DEVELOPER** TRAVELLER'S TALES / **FORMAT** XBOX 360, XBOX ONE (REVIEWED) / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

LEGO MARVEL'S AVENGERS

Saving the world, one brick at a time



REVIEWER
TOM STONE
Live OXM Tom Stone
@TheTomStrange

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
Lego platformer that covers every Marvel film from *Assemble* to *Age of Ultron*.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Previous Lego games, but with improved combat and less obtuse puzzles.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Fans of the films happy to hear the same lines again.

Didn't he just use to make cameos? There are so many collectables, unlockable costumes and whole scenes featuring Stan Lee in *Marvel's Avengers*, he's practically the star. His constant presence and cries of 'excelsior!' will either charm you or make you want to brick him. We hope it's the former, because this might be the best Lego game yet. Also because we don't want you to hurt Stan Lee.

Lego combat (finally) sees an improvement, with every character getting a special takedown: Loki turns invisible and then attacks from behind; Hulk rages out on any goon foolish enough to pick a fight with him. Even better are team-up moves, like having Thor strike Captain America's shield for a killer shockwave. You'll want to try more Avengers just to see them all.

One minute you'll be shooting arrows and kicking Hydra agents to blocks as Hawkeye and Black Widow, the next the action will fly to Hulk and Thor, and you with it. Frequent switching between pairs keeps the pace up, and levels show a keen eye for cinematic action. Set-pieces, like the battle for New York, use slow-motion, explosions and Lego pedestrians running around screaming to capture the mad buzz of a superhero blockbuster. There's little filler here – Traveller's Tales skips to iconic scenes and focuses on getting them right.

It's a shame that the production values falter at the voice acting. The main cast's audio is ripped from the films, and with no new dialogue we're left with surprisingly straight retellings of *Assemble* and *Age of Ultron*. Lines aren't even recorded well, with music fading out as we strain to hear another whisper-quiet Robert Downey Jr quip.

Limited by the dialogue, TT settles for visual gags, like Thanos listening to his own *Guardians of the Galaxy*-style mix tapes, and even a kiss between Hulk and Tony Stark. It's frequently funny and always charming, but we still wish this franchise had gotten the full *Lego Batman*-style skewering it deserved.

But it's hard to stay disappointed at a game so generous. Over a hundred characters, huge hubworlds full of fun side quests ('defy Odin by taking a selfie on his throne as the Hulk') and some of the sprightliest Lego gameplay yet. Excelsior, indeed. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

COOLEST CHARACTER



THE UNBEATABLE SQUIRREL GIRL
Bet every superhero wishes they'd been clever enough to put 'unbeatable' in their names.

THE BEST BIT



Chris Hemsworth's plastic performance arguably works better in Lego form.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

? A whole Season Pass worth of DLC is on the way, based on *Ant-Man* and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

OVERALL

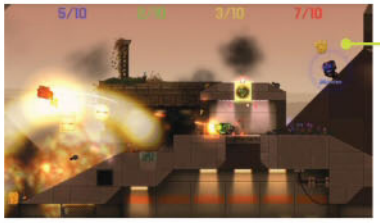
A terrific superhero toy box shows TT doesn't need a glowing toy pad to entertain. Just great action, a love of superhero cinema, and not one overpriced level pack in sight.

8





The bullet time slowdown is necessary, as there's too much going on for just two eyes to focus on.



The speed at which you're travelling affects the flight path of deflected objects.



PUBLISHER MOJANG / **DEVELOPER** OXEYE GAME STUDIO / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

COBALT

I'm blue, da ba dee da ba aaaarghh...



REVIEWER
ALEX DALE
Live ChocoboOfDoom
@SporadicDaler

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
In 12 words or less? Er... it's about rolling into grenades?

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Cute and occasionally thrilling, but struggles with a lack of structure.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Those who like mastering fiddly mechanics... and throwing them back in your friends' faces.

How do you follow something as universally appealing as *Minecraft*? The answer, apparently, is with something so deliciously impulsive and scatterbrained that it's difficult to pin down what it's actually about...

Wait, I've got it! Movement! It's about movement. Or it is when it's good, at least. *Cobalt* is a 2D platform-shooter hybrid that initially seems like it's going down the lazy-paced, explore-'em-up route. You're a small space-robot thing who exits his ship to explore a distress signal, returning only to upgrade his gear. Outside, however, the action comes thick and fast, and you find that despite our hero's stout appearance, he's a somersaulting demon with some surprising tricks up his sleeve.

Agile he may be, but he's also brittle like bird bones, so to stay alive he has to keep moving. Aiming is automatic, freeing you to focus on the on-screen gymnastics, but despite the breakneck pace, survival boils down to mental agility rather than reactions. Whenever a threat approaches the action slows down, offering a window for you to biff the projectile back to sender. Parrying objects like this is the game's central conceit, and interplays brilliantly with our hero's array of jumps, rolls, slides and particularly momentum. It's a very rewarding mechanic to master.

Cobalt shines in multiplayer, with matches ascending into farce as grenades and bullets bound around the screen like shuttlecocks. But it struggles to transplant this joy into a wider single-player game. It's a lack of focus, rather than lack of ideas, at fault: extras from crafting to stealth to lockpicking to hacking guns to rideable critters emerge on the scene promising depth, but end up just drowning the fun combat mechanics. There's charm in the way it flits from idea to idea, sure, but it results in poorly-structured levels and frustrating difficulty spikes.

What *Cobalt* is, then, is a madcap local multiplayer arena combat game akin to the PlayStation 4's *Towerfall*, except without the tight design. What it *isn't* is a cohesive or compelling solo offering, but if you bemoan the lack of classic "on the couch" multiplayer games around these days, this is a nippy alternative to the likes of *Clusterpuck 99*, *Trials* and *Knight Squad*. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

THE BEST BIT



We love the way your little critters get given names if they stay alive long enough.

THE RIVALS

TRIALS FUSION	8
CLUSTERPUCK	8
CHARIOT	7

COMPLETION CLOCK

7 HOURS

OVERALL

An energetic, skilful action-platformer that rewards experimentation and practice... but frustrating scenarios encourage neither. The core of a great game is here, but hidden.

6





A heavy-handed grain filter spoils the Soviet propaganda aesthetic.



Missing a single shot is frequently enough to fail the sniping sections.



PUBLISHER UBISOFT / **DEVELOPER** CLIMAX STUDIOS / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

ASSASSIN'S CREED CHRONICLES: RUSSIA

A five-tsar thriller, or a load of Bolsheviks?



REVIEWER
CHRIS SCHILLING
Live Rockin Stroll
@schillingc

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
The third and final entry in the 2.5D spin-off series.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Great, assuming you're a fan of insta-fail stealth and leaden controls.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Hardcore *Creed* fans only – and even they might be disappointed.

It's Nikolai Orelov's last day on the job. Pretty routine, really: he just has to steal a vital artefact from under the noses of the Bolsheviks, who are holding Tsar Nicholas II and his family captive. Alas, he's picked the day they're all to be executed; worse still, his conscience is pricked by the Tsar's lone surviving daughter. With macguffin in hand and Anastasia in tow, he must escape with both of them before he can leave the Order for good.

Orelov's timing is lousy, but it's not always his fault. Or ours either: as in its Indian precursor, the challenge is artificially heightened by unforgiving design. If you finished the two previous *Chronicles* games and figured the way to improve them would be to make direct combat even more unusable and toss in a handful of stodgy sniping set-pieces, then you'll be delighted with this. The rest of us will wonder how a trilogy that had such promise got more disagreeable with each instalment.

It's not that this doesn't try anything different, merely that most of its new ideas are failures. Not all, mind: despite a preposterous plot (even by *Creed* standards) and some honkingly bad dialogue, controlling two characters adds a certain dynamism. As Orelov, you'll snipe patrolling guards before they can spot your young charge. As Anastasia, you'll sneak through corridors, opening windows to give your ally a clear line of sight to his targets. It's single-player co-op, in essence, and there are satisfying moments when the two are able to work together.

Sadly, these are too few and far between to offset the frustrating bits. Most of the time you can't afford to be spotted: cause any kind of alert, and the grey curtain of death instantly falls. It doesn't help that you can sometimes be seen when you're outside a guard's cone of vision. Worse, any time you dare try anything clever, there's usually a "gotcha!" moment, as the designers tut: do it our way, or you'll be banished to the last checkpoint. Yes, in Soviet Russia, game plays you – and it turns out that's not much fun at all. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

THE WORST BIT



Waiting five seconds for the scenery to be drawn in after one checkpoint. Yikes.

PRO TIP



Not earned enough points in the first stage for the health boost? Replay it until you do.

DID YOU KNOW?

Anastasia's rumoured survival has inspired several films and TV shows, though sadly it's all been disproved.

OVERALL

Without being Volga, *ACC: Russia* is a real kick in the Urals. It's the worst of both worlds: punitive old-school design and needless modern complexities, with rehashed set-pieces the final nail.

4

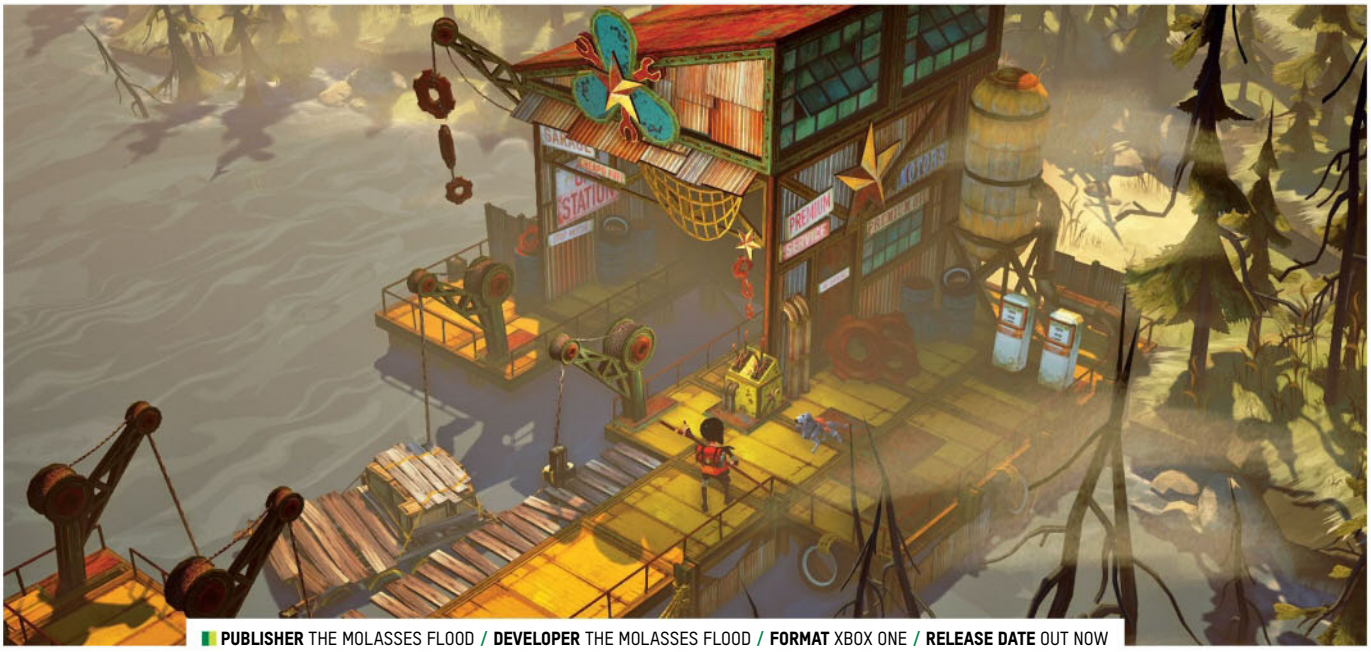




Wolves are your most constant foe, quick-killing bastards who are hard to shake off.



If you don't fix a broken bone in time, you'll hobble for the rest of your playthrough.



PUBLISHER THE MOLASSES FLOOD / **DEVELOPER** THE MOLASSES FLOOD / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD

Your watery grave has never looked nicer



REVIEWER
JOE SKREBELS
Live 0XM Joe
@2plus2isjoe

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
A bucolic survival game that wants you to relax and die chilled.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Don't Starve, but set at the end of *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

WHO'S IT FOR?
Those after a more straightforward survival experience.

The Flame in the Flood aims to make the survival game – that lethal cocktail of ticking gauges, mundane loot and constant danger – something less stressful. In what seems like a submerged Southern America, you take Scout, her adopted dog Aesop, and a rickety raft down a mega-river that has swallowed most of civilisation. It's somewhere between *Huckleberry Finn* and the Old Testament, but with more risk of death from intestinal parasites.

The look is wonderful. Picasso-faced characters lope through a toybox world, sunrise casts long shadows over the lazy currents of the river, and storms strobe your screen grandly. A mostly wordless slide guitar soundtrack makes travel a quiet pleasure, and the game's down-home lexicon masks its nastier elements – useful items are a "good fixin'," diarrhoea is "the scoots".

But this is still a survival game, and a harsh one. The river is your overworld, procedurally generating visitable hubs that can hold various kinds of loot (food, materials, places to sleep), threats (wolves, snakes and wild boar can end a game in seconds) or cryptic clues as to how the world got to be this way. You must manage all this to stay healthy, warm, fed and watered, while travelling as far as possible, to find the ending in the 6-8 hour Campaign or bragging rights in Endless Mode.

Unfortunately, *FiF* is neither slick nor varied enough to sustain its pleasant illusion. A good third of your time will be spent navigating its fiddly menus, transferring currently useless items from your bag to your dog's bag or your raft, then having to readjust. Where the likes of *Don't Starve* offer numerous paths of progression, the single focus here – get as far as possible from the start point – means crafting is totally one-note. Make incrementally better equipment, stay alive... It begins to feel more like meter-management than anything close to real-world survival.

The test of a survival game is whether its darkest moments – when you have five illnesses, are being chased by a bear and have run out of even the mouldiest food – can still feel like some twisted form of fun. While its downtime may be way more pleasurable than most, *The Flame in the Flood* simply can't manage that trick. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

PRO TIP



Get a rudder ASAP – sailing's more fun when you don't expect to die every four seconds.

OBJECT OF DESIRE



POUCH
Two rabbit pelts and a stitching kit gets you an inventory-expanding Pouch. You'll want about five, trust us.

DID YOU KNOW?

Dev The Molasses Flood has top pedigree – team members have previously made *BioShock*, *Halo* and *Guitar Hero* games.

OVERALL

There's much to love here, but in the end it feels like a noble experiment. The basics are just a little too basic to make the delightful presentation anything other than a distraction.

6

From parkour to car-gore… Splattering zombies with your buggy is a giddy delight, and the handling is a dream.



PUBLISHER TECHLAND / **DEVELOPER** TECHLAND / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW



REVIEWER
TOM STONE
Live 0XM Tom Stone
@TheTomStrange

DYING LIGHT: THE FOLLOWING

"Stick a car in it," said a Techland employee. Promote that man!

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
An expansion to last year's zombie-smasher, swapping well-worn trainers for a shiny new motor.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Getting into 50 car accidents in a row. But in a good way.

WHO'S IT FOR?
People looking for a safer place to vent their road rage than the M5.

Hitting someone with your car is rarely much fun. The victim screams in agony, threatens to sue, or whinges about his legs no longer working. Then the poor driver has to go through the hassle of burying a body and lying to the police. Who needs the grief?

Odd, then, that hitting a zombie with your car is a gooey thrill that doesn't dull after hours of play. *Dead Rising 3* may have beaten it to the vehicles, and there are more undead games out there than zombies in *The Walking Dead*, but that's been *Dying Light*'s MO from the start: taking an existing concept and executing it so well, you remember why the idea was so good in the first place.

This expansion leaves the city of Harran for its neighbouring countryside. If you're a fan of the brilliant first-person parkour (rough-and-tumble climbing with a wonderful physical feel that *Assassin's Creed* should spend its year away emulating), then you might be disappointed. There are far fewer structures to clamber over here. But given how much parkour made the base game stand out, it's impressive how little we miss it. Once you get your car, powering down long country roads is a worthy replacement. Not that we often saw the roads. Experience may be awarded for fast driving and landing jumps but, *come on*, there's only one true way to level up your wheel-work.

Speeding through a field of groaning zombies rewards you with a chorus of squelching and a blood-splatter crescendo. Responsive steering and brakes mean no undead have a hope of escaping. Counterattacks from average zombies are laughably weak, letting us rip apart entire country lanes. Occasionally one gets stuck on the hood, its head exploding and its insides spraying over us at 60 miles per hour. Brilliant, addictive carnage.

Dead Rising's weapon degradation would snap our favourite toy over its knee the moment it sensed we were starting to have fun with it, but *The Following* encourages reckless driving. Hit a horde and XP flies up. Ramps are everywhere, with experience awarded for even the loosest interpretations of the word "landing". The car takes damage and needs refuelling, sure, but you can get away with kicking it down several mountains before the game recommends a tune-up. Techland gets the fact that being behind the wheel is 8,000% more fun than grumbling over the engine. By the time we'd upgraded our car with a flamethrower, we realised why we'd been huffing silver paint for hours – this is the real *Mad Max* game we've been waiting for.

Being on four wheels doesn't make you invulnerable. At night, the main campaign's Volatiles return to stalk the

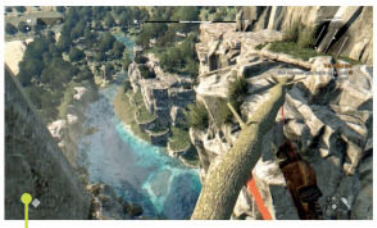


Kill Stream

The Following has drop-in online play, with randoms able to join your game anytime. It's a nice feature, even if the likes of *Left 4 Dead* won't be worried. Nonetheless, a big thanks to the guy who helped us with the Demolisher boss fight. Less thanks for then stealing our car. Hope your brain got eaten.

You'll have to boost to get zombies off your car. Seriously, Kyle, invest in a windshield.





It's a huge new area – but driving means exploring is rarely a chore.







So. Much. Blood. *Dead Island 2* will be lucky if there's any red stuff left over.

"This is the real *Mad Max* game we've been waiting for"

fields – ferocious zombies that are practically instant death if they catch you. Get spotted, and your car might as well be a hearse for all the protection it'll give. Your only hope is blasting full speed in the other direction, inevitably attracting more Volatiles along the way, constantly aware that the world's deadliest conga line is *right behind you*. It's not quite as intense as the panicked parkour escapes that kept our pulses racing through the main game, but it's undoubtedly exhilarating. Rare is the game that hands over a landmine-dropping car and still has us worrying for our lives around every turn.

Out of the car, combat switches to an up-close-and-personal affair that never lets you feel safe. One zombie is easy enough, but three or more should have you worried – which is as it should be. Weapon upgrading and crafting are all easily achieved thanks to a clear, helpful UI. Again, Techland doesn't rock the innovation boat, just gives it a lick of paint and makes sure it runs (screaming in terror) like a dream.

Story? We're in the countryside to investigate a religious cult that seem somehow immune to zombieism. While that main mystery is fairly compelling, *The Following* is held back by dull, unlikeable characters speaking to us live from the uncanny valley. What's the point of giving NPCs such detailed faces if they're barely going to move? It's a frustrating flaw in an otherwise luscious looking adventure. Even a slightly chugging framerate can't spoil the awe of a gorgeous sunset drive.

A generous amount of varied quests keeps the pacing tight, until it sends you inside. Overlong swimming sections we can forgive, but one boss fight with a Demolisher makes *Gears of War*'s Berserker battle look about as stressful as putting on mittens. The first-person view that gives driving such a great sense of speed is terrible here, making dodge attempts exercises in tedious guesswork. Getting stuck on out-of-frame scenery annoyed us, but that had nothing on attempt 63, where the Demolisher could somehow hit us even though *we weren't in the same room*.

However, at any moment we could abandon the fussier moments, hop in the car and vent our frustrations by turning the walking dead into fresh road jam. Accelerating through the countryside, saving civilians, killing monsters and solving a mystery – it's *World War Z* meets *Scooby Doo* with a dash of *Wacky Racers*. If you don't think that sounds worth your time, then maybe we should dedicate an evening to running you down after all. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

BETTER THAN...



MAD MAX
Had heaps of potential, but kept kicking you out of the car to force you into highly repetitive *Batman*-like brawls. *The Following* is the game this should've been.

THE WORST BIT



The Demolisher fight. We hope he's waiting for all the designers in horrible design hell.

DID YOU KNOW?

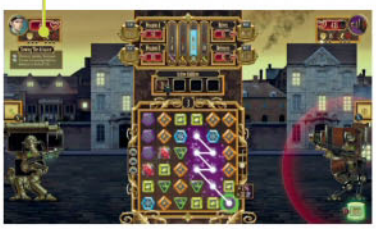
The special edition offers a supporting acting role in a *Dying Light* movie, a driving lesson (keep the car) and more. Yours for just $10m!

OVERALL

Are you looking for design innovation or enjoyable execution? We'll take the latter so long as Techland is behind the wheel. A gloriously entertaining, blood-soaked country drive.

8

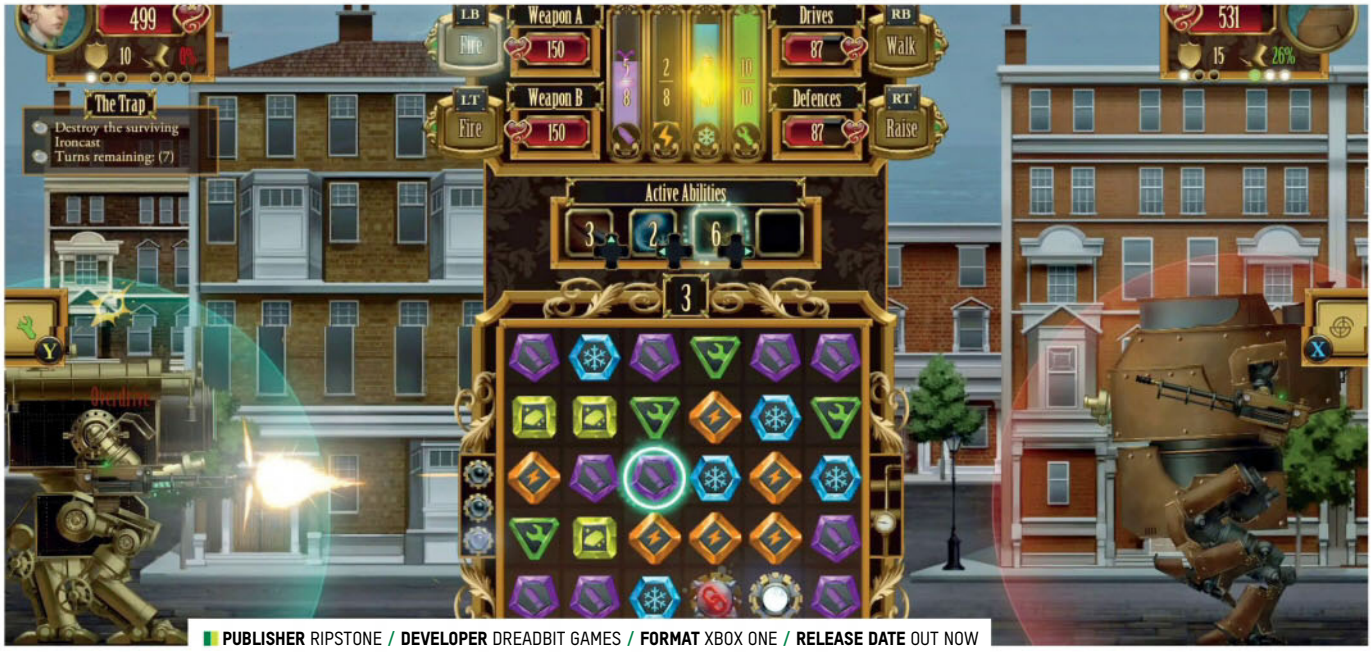




Trust us, this confrontation is more tense than playing Russian Roulette on top of a sleeping murderer.



Play like other puzzlers and you'll soon be sobbing in the wreckage of your war machine.



PUBLISHER RIPSTONE / **DEVELOPER** DREADBIT GAMES / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

IRONCAST

Stiff upper lip, even stiffer difficulty curve



REVIEWER

TOM STONE
Live OXM Tom Stone
@TheTomStrange

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
Dull puzzle game and simple strategy combined to make something that's so much better.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Messing around playing *Bejeweled* when you're meant to be driving a tank.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Puzzle game fans. British patriots. The stiff upper lipped.

What cocky, young no-nothings we were when we first signed up for *Ironcast*. We were mildly intrigued when a 2D steampunk mech, an Ironcast, stomped onto London's 19th century streets. But our eyes almost rolled out of our heads when a grid of coloured tiles dominated the centre of the screen. We've played enough *Puzzle Quest* iterations to know the drill: this was another *Bejeweled*-a-like puzzler with a rubbish story trying to keep you engaged during repetitive tile-matching. Yawning, we started matching lines of three or more tiles. Then our Ironcast blew up and we had to restart the whole game. Huh?

Start showing some respect, private, because there's far more to *Ironcast* than idle tile-matching. The real objective is balancing power. Match ammo tiles for your cannons, energy for shields and movement, ice for cooldown and spanners for repairs.

Each turn gives you three goes on the tile-matching grid, and as many strategic manoeuvres as you can afford with your accumulated resources. Clearing as many tiles as possible has its advantages (like bonus XP), but it's smarter to save them for later, when you need more ammo, energy and the like. It means the way you play the puzzle game directly affects the way you play the turn-based strategy, making both mechanics more involving. Blast enemies hard and often, yes, but keep energy in mind or your war is over. Initially we were forgetting to prioritise shields, or making sure we were focusing fire on the right weak points. But once you start getting to grips with both mechanics it's as addictive as any puzzle game.

Between battles you spend scrap to repair your Ironcast, build new weapons and choose augmentations (cooldown powers that boost defence, stealing enemy resources, etc) to turn the tide of battle. It's a tough game and death is permanent, so every choice is crucial to the war effort. But it's a pleasingly stupid war worth fighting for. A conflict between the French and British that involves rescuing tea, battling over-zealous commanders who don't realise they're on your side and defeating the enemy in the politest way possible. A charming layer of British nonsense adds to 2016's first brilliant surprise. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

PROS/CONS

- ✔ Excellent mix of puzzling and turn-based combat
- ✔ Deep strategy
- ✔ Characters far more charming than real British people
- ✖ The difficulty curve feels very steep
- ✖ Initially there's a lot to learn
- ✖ We actually quite like the French

PRO TIP



Play defensively – it's smarter to fail one mission than lose a tank to permadeath.

DID YOU KNOW?

The game was inspired by Victorian sci-fi writers such as H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. Hope we're as inspiring in the future.

OVERALL

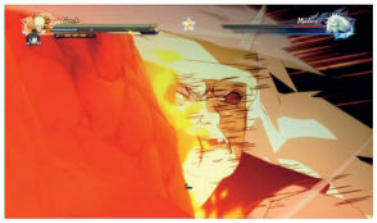
Find turn-based strategy too intimidating but puzzle games too lightweight? This inspired hybrid bridges the gap perfectly, mashing up two stale genres and finding something fresh.

8

Sit back, mash B and enjoy the pyrotechnics. There are worse ways to spend an afternoon.







Fancy riding on a giant, cigarette-sucking toad? Your odd wish is *Naruto*'s command.



PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO / **DEVELOPER** CYBERCONNECT2 / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW

NARUTO SHIPPUDEN: ULTIMATE NINJA STORM 4

Anime amazement or a load of old Shippuden?



REVIEWER
MATTHEW CASTLE
Live OXM Pesto
@mrbasil_pesto

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?
Cinematic fighting game based on Naruto's *Shippuden* era.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Fighting so shallow, it makes *Smash Bros.* look like *BlazBlue*.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Strictly for existing fans. Poor retelling of the story arcs will baffle newcomers.

If games were judged on effort-to-spectacle ratios then Naruto's latest would be an all-time hall of famer. Never has such power come with so few button presses. Tap Y, tap B, then watch as celestial archers turn mountains into pincushions, or a thousand stone palms pulverise a man to paste. It's incongruous to see a mushroom cloud only peck at a health bar, and unskippable cutscenes kill the battle rhythm dead, but it's hard not to be mesmerised by the ludicrous scale.

Lucky really, as this is basic stuff. Bar canny use of counters and substitution jutsu (quickly swapping places with a log to get the drop on enemies), victory boils down to who can fling the most cutscenes at their opponent. By the time they recover from a divine drubbing you'll have charged the energy to launch another. As fun as it is to humiliate the gormless AI, you hardly feel like a master ninja. Even the new tag-team setup fails to deepen the action; swapping heroes mid-combo looks cool, but we only do it if another party member has a move that's easier to spam.

As such, it's not a good competitive game. Online play – when it isn't laggy – lets fans conjure fantasy match-ups from a tasty 60-character roster, but the fights lack the demented excess of the story campaign. This single-player mode is dedicated to recreating the anime, ensuring everything follows the script with liberal use of quick time events and mid-battle mini-games. The way it can morph into a scrolling shooter or a *Dynasty Warriors*-style brawler reminds us of *Bayonetta's* fleet-footed genre experiments, albeit lacking Platinum's feel for surgical beatdowns.

It's a shame this action spectacle couldn't be spun into a substantial campaign, like Ubisoft's decent 2007 stab at an open-world *Naruto* game. The closest *UNS4* comes to that is the ropey Adventure mode where you explore lifeless replicas of show locations for whatever it is that will trigger the next fight. Okay, it lets you enjoy playable flashbacks to the pre-*Shippuden* days, but it's a plodding way to deliver them. Story mode zips along at a better pace, but its mix of static art and in-engine models (with awful lip-sync) to tell the story looks cheap and is hard to follow.

Still, you're only ever a button tap away from seeing it at its barmy best. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

THE BEST BIT



The climactic scrap between Naruto and Sasuke is one for the ages.

KEY INFLUENCES



70% *Naruto Shippuden*
15% Mashing the B button
15% Quick time events

COMPLETION CLOCK



OVERALL

Fans will love how *Ultimate Ninja Storm 4* captures the look and carnage of *Naruto*'s anime battling, but it's too restrictive and repetitive to convince as a standalone fighting game.



ALSO RELEASED

Condensed criticism of the other new games in shops and on Xbox Live

Visit gamesradar.com/oxm for the full reviews



Some day you too could make a level that looks this good.

FORMAT XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** MARTIN KITTS / **PRICE** £14.99

GUNSCAPE

Minecraft meets *Quake* is the concept behind *Gunscape*'s mix of ultra-basic FPS and block-stacking level creation kit. Knock up an arena – any shape you like, as long as it's made of cubes – and tear around alone or with your mates, online or split-screen, blasting monsters or each other. A game like this relies almost entirely on the quality of its user-generated content, and *Gunscape* is maximising its chances by pooling levels created on multiple platforms.

The campaign mode doesn't give a great first impression. It has all the visual appeal of a grainy webcam video of *Doom*'s ugly sister. The framerate is jerky and the screen tears all over the place. User-generated levels that don't contain quite so many blocks run much more smoothly, but the game will struggle if you have a case of block diarrhoea in the editing mode. It's arguably more fun to build than to actually play, but isn't that always the way?

6



FORMAT XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** MARTIN KITTS / **PRICE** £4.79

FACTOTUM 90

So your spaceship has broken down in an asteroid field and your only hope of fixing it is a pair of cardboard box robots. Guided by an irritating voice actor, who sounds like the guy from IT who likes to crack jokes in Klingon, you have to find your way through a series of increasingly tricky puzzle rooms.

Each robot gets its own screen window, and by swapping between the two you are then able to sit one on a switch while the other rides an elevator platform, or position them both to divert a beam of light round a corner, and so on. Both robots have to make it to the exit, which can require a bit of lateral thought as well as many presses of the reset button. The fiddly controls, narrow field of view and slow pace make this game much more frustrating than it needs to be, but it's built on solid foundations.

6



FORMAT XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** MARTIN KITTS / **PRICE** £19.99

D/GENERATION HD

Hailing from the early 1990s, *D/Generation HD* is from a time when enemies looked like fluorescent Liquorice Allsorts and the closest thing they had to AI was the ability to bounce off the wall they'd just blundered into.

The graphics have been spruced up at the expense of that old retro charm, but the gameplay remains identical. Shoot your way through a building filled with rogue science experiments, rescuing people as you go. With limited lives, and a single touch from the building's abstract denizens meaning instant death, a demoralising trip back to the start of the game is always just around the next corner. It's the same price as the entire *Rare Replay* collection, it comes with no extras, and it's sorely missing an option to ditch the ugly updated visuals in favour of the original Amiga look. Not a great value package, really.

5



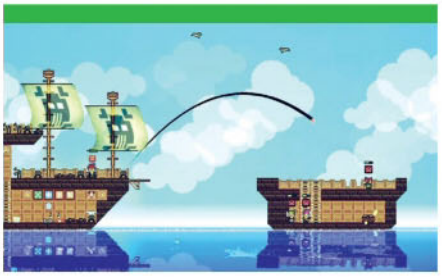
FORMAT XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** MARTIN KITTS / **PRICE** £5.59

LEVEL 22

With its pages of forgettable story and frequent interrupting messages, *Level 22* certainly does its best to ape the daddy of stealth games. Hammering the buttons to try and skip through all of that gave us some serious Solid Snake flashbacks.

Unlike Snake, here you never get to shoot anybody. You play a drunk who turns up late for work and, for some reason, has to sneak past every employee in the building. If even the junior post room assistant finds you lingering in his field of vision for too long, the game is up. To stop anybody recognising you, you can stand in the middle of the office and pretend to read a newspaper, or throw doughnuts to distract security guards. It's pretty ropey, and there's little satisfaction to be had from getting through one door only to find more of the same in the next area.

4



FORMAT XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** ALEX DALE / **PRICE** £11.99

PIXEL PIRACY

When it comes to ideas, this 2D pirate-'em-up plunders from the best. It takes the charming art style, sense of exploration and management of *Terraria*, and fuses it with the scurvy ship/teambuilding antics of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. Your motley crew even reward your keeping them alive and watered by regaling you with squeaky sea shanties.

However, while *Pixel Piracy* is endearing to play for an hour or two, the limited nature of both the combat and the adventuring soon bobbles to the surface and it becomes apparent that you've been given a, ahem, *rum* deal. It also feels as unfinished as a pirate with a parrot's egg on his shoulder. Both glitches and interface niggles conspire to leave our timbers feeling thoroughly unshivered.

4



FORMAT XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** MATTHEW CASTLE / **PRICE** £31.99

AGATHA CHRISTIE: THE ABC MURDERS

Hercule Poirot's reliance on his famed "little grey cells" makes him a tricky videogame hero. Physical clues aren't as important as psychological tells teased out through mind games and double bluffs, neither of which are easy to show on screen. Instead, this is a conservative point-and-click mystery where you pick at crime scenes, quiz locals and pry secrets from locked boxes.

The one concession to Poirot's often odd behaviour are ego points, earned by staying true to his character. This means playing the rude foreigner and keeping your moustache in check – there's a 200G Achievement for preening before every in-game mirror. When a game functions better as a tache-cleaning sim, you know you're in trouble.

5



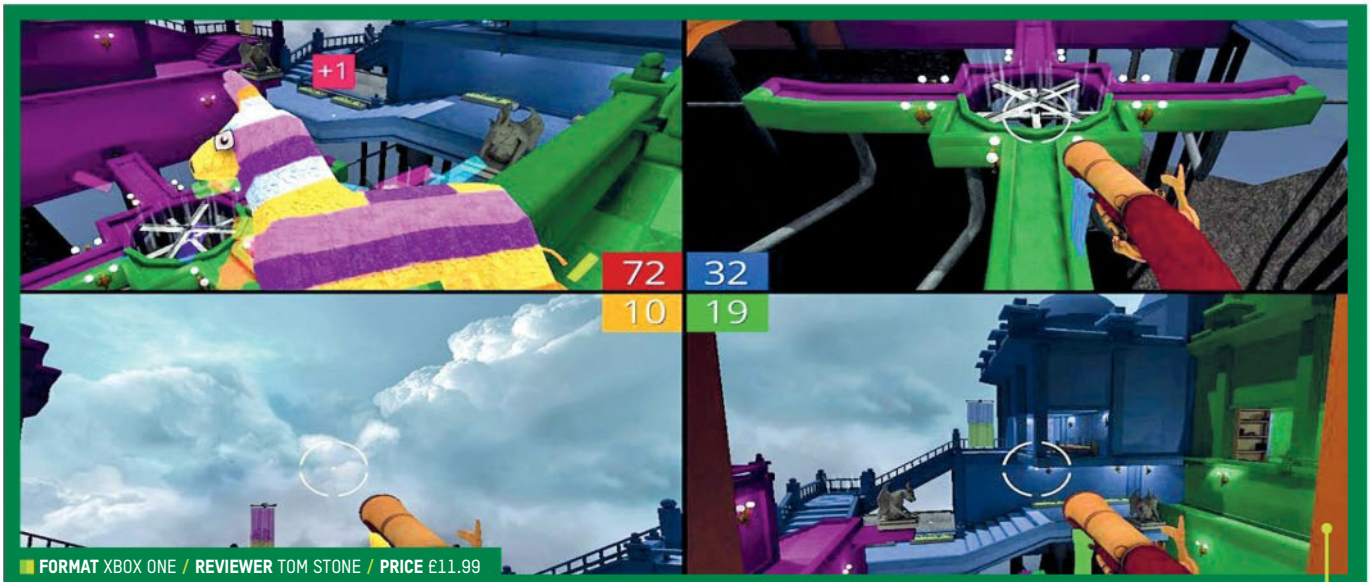
FORMAT XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** TOM STONE / **PRICE** £7.99

TINY TROOPERS

Run through top-down levels with up to four soldiers, holding the analogue stick in the direction you want to shoot. Slaughtering humans earns you points, but killing a chicken carries a penalty. What kind of vegan propaganda is this? Occasionally you'll find grenades and rocket launchers but you'll be long asleep by then.

Missions often take less time to complete than reading this review. Shooting is so bland that firing a gun carries all the excitement of filing a tax return. The game's one 'idea' is your soldiers permanently dying, *XCOM*-style, but you'll probably be more envious than upset – the lucky corpses don't have to play this rubbish anymore. If you're going to carbon copy the tropes of far more ambitious war shooters, at least try to nick some of their fun and variety while you're at it.

4



FORMAT XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** TOM STONE / **PRICE** £11.99

SCREENCHEAT

Challenge 1: Find each other. Challenge 2: Find and shoot whoever composed the awful music.

An FPS with local multiplayer is novel enough these days, but here your opponents are also invisible. The only way to hit each other is random guesswork, following bullet trajectories and looking at their screens. Initially it's confusion and swearing from all sides as you try to find each other. Capture the Fun and Juggernaut make good starter modes, as the only scoring player is also the most visible, smartly balancing the action.

But One Shot mode shows *Screencheat*'s premise at its best. Guns only reload after everyone's fired their shot, leading to mad scrambles to figure out everyone's places before the next chance to blast each other. It forces you to really embrace the gimmicky premise, as opposed to straight deathmatch modes, where it's too tempting to blast the grenade launcher until you get lucky.

There's fun to be had, but the idea feels too lightweight to sustain a whole game. Most of the enjoyment comes from figuring out what the hell's going on. Once you have, long-term appeal might be as hard to see as your rivals.

6

ON THE DOWNLOAD

Latest add-ons and indie games rated

The dark corners of Baba Yaga's domain are a good excuse to ogle those lighting effects. Dribble, swoon, etc.



PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX / **DEVELOPER** CRYSTAL DYNAMICS /
FORMAT XBOX ONE (REVIEWED), XBOX 360 / **REVIEWER** MATTHEW CASTLE / **PRICE** £7.99

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER – BABA YAGA: THE TEMPLE OF THE WITCH

Lara meets a villain most fowl...

Lara's first story DLC pivots on the idea that all is not as it seems. A dose of hallucinogenic plant spores sees *Rise*'s wintry palette melt into hectic greens and purples as the dead walk the earth and a giant house on chicken legs – ripped straight out of Slavic folklore – threatens to trample her physics-enabled hair into the dirt. It's a blast from Croft's silly past, worlds away from the walking bruise she is now. Or is it? Once the spores are expunged, some fun is had discovering a more sober reality.

Could this be a metaphor for DLC add-ons? They present themselves in the Xbox store as fascinating trinkets stuffed with value. This one boasts of three hours of play! Another tomb! Rare items! But hand over the £8, administer the antidote, and the truth comes into focus. Three hours is a more modest one and a half. That extra tomb is an easy pulley puzzle. Those rare items... well, you can't really argue with a goat skull hat and a bow that fires insanity gas.

//It's small-scale compared to what Lara has already survived//

The DLC is disappointingly reliant on pre-existing areas. Launched within the Soviet Installation, the story strand ends up spending more time here than it does in the new area, the Wicked Vale. Worse, it's time padded out with scavenging and hunting tasks against familiar enemy forces.

Part of problem is down to the excellent pace of *Rise*'s adventure: the way the quest barrels along, feeding Lara new upgrades and locations, means that it doesn't handle side stories well. *Baba Yaga* has nothing to add to that machine-tooled storyline; if you play it during the campaign it'd feel like a needless aside, if tackled after, it's small-scale compared to what Lara has already survived. Even with a lungful of magic spores, it would be hard to be dazzled by this uncertain expansion. **OXM**





Thanks to those 'buy to let' bastards, we can't even afford a shack on chicken legs. Broken Britain!

The OXM Verdict

How does it manage to be over too soon and still find time to recycle levels? It has to be witchcraft.

5

ALSO RELEASED

From best to worst, the latest additions to Xbox Live Marketplace



1 RAINBOW SIX SIEGE – COBALT WEAPON SKIN

A skin that makes your weapon a lovely cobalt blue. Wait, won't that be easier to spot?

Price: £2.39



2 RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER – WILDERNESS SURVIVOR

Increases odds of getting exotic resources from common animals.

Price: £2.39



3 KUNG FU PANDA LEVEL: SPIRIT REALM

Completely exhausted *Kung Fu Panda*? Then you have bigger problems than this DLC can cure, friend.

Price: £3.19



4 EVOLVE – KALA JELLYFISH SKIN

Remember *Evolve*? Like jellyfish? Wish Kala had jellyfish-skin? Why? Actually, we really don't want to know.

Price: £1.59



5 PROJECT CARS – CAR 8

The Ford Falcon FG is the latest free addition to your garage. A decent ride at our favourite price.

Price: FREE



6 MORTAL KOMBAT X – KOMBAT PACK 2

Pricey, but new fighters include icons like Leatherface, Alien and Triborg the Cyber Ninja. Yeah, you can keep Triborg.

Price: £15.99

The Kraken's Revenge silently contemplates what all this fighting is really for.



FORMAT XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** PAUL RANDALL / **PRICE** £11.59

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS III – AWAKENING

There's an overpowering sense of familiarity about Treyarch's first wave of *Black Ops* DLC bombardment, as maps focus on repurposing ideas from the past and present. Unfortunately, it's an almost even split between maps that feel like a refreshing refinement and ones that don't make for fluid matches.

Pick of the bunch is Splash, an aggressively bright map with a huge octopus in its centre. It's reminiscent of the base game map, Aquarium, with both having large outdoor lanes flanking a congested middle ground.

Skyjacked is a remake of Hijacked from *Black Ops II* – only instead of a boat, it's an airship, because, hey, it's the future. It's a compact space with plenty of opportunities to string together some jet-pack parkour.

The other two maps simply can't match them. Rise is hugely varied, but disjointed. It chucks everything that *Black Ops III* offers, with obvious free-running routes and multi-level action, but it never gels into something satisfying. Similarly, Gauntlet is too conceptually ambitious for its own good. It's a training simulator that is split between three distinct strips – inner city, arctic and jungle – that never feel cohesive enough to make for satisfying encounters.

//Instead of a boat, you get an airship, because, hey, it's the future//

Zombies mode, meanwhile, gets Der Eisendrache, which sees the soldiers from The Giant continuing their quest in an Austrian castle, offering plenty of branching paths and secrets that'll make multiple playthroughs an enjoyable necessity. As a package, *Awakening* offers no surprises, with Treyarch doubling down on everything that works – and a few ideas that sadly don't – in the base game's maps. **OXM**



The OXM Verdict

About half a good map pack, *Awakening* offers little innovation from what's already available.

6

Wait – surely these two shouldn't be on the same side?



FORMAT XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** ALEX DALE / **PRICE** FREE

RAINBOW SIX SIEGE – BLACK ICE

Black Ice? Thin Ice, more like. Ubisoft Montreal has the right idea in giving all its upcoming maps away for free – it means *Siege*'s fanbase, which struggles enough to get a game on Ubi's flaky servers at the best of times, isn't in danger of getting carved up. But in order to balance the books, the team are drip-feeding new operators into the fray, and that's risky. All it takes is one duff operator to upset the team balance before the cracks start showing.

It makes sense, then, that *Black Ice*'s new operators are a conservative pair. Available for £3.99 each (or unlocked in-game for an eye-watering 25,000 renown), Buck and Frost are Canadian special ops who bring little innovation to the table, yet their special weapons are just different enough to add some fizz to the formula. A defender, Frost's closest comparable is door-trap specialist Kapkan. Her bear trap differs, however, in that it is placed on the floor and can't be detected by electronics, catching foolhardy attackers by surprise. It has been devastating during the opening weeks of play, but as with Kapkan, her effectiveness is swiftly diminishing as the community learns to anticipate her traps. On the attacking side, Buck is a brute force character; his special tool is a shotgun capable of shredding barricades in a single blast. It's with Buck the first cracks appear; his gung-ho style brings out the worst in some players.

//The special weapons are just enough to add fizz to the formula//

Fortunately, the new map, Yacht, is a cracker, split over four levels and with winding, confusing passageways that make infiltration a nightmare. A few cracks here and then, maybe, but this update holds up. **OXM**



The OXM Verdict

Unambitious, but anything that freshens up one of 2015's better shooters is worth the modest outlay.

7

Indie Roundup / For our final list, we showcase the XBLIG games that are actually good. Really!



ESCAPE GOAT
Inspired by NES classic *Solomon's Key*, this fiendish platform-puzzler will have you chewing on a tin can.
★★★★★



RETROFIT: UNLOADED
Intense *Galaga* clone that makes *Geometry Wars* look like a washed-out photocopy of a water biscuit.
★★★★★



MOUNT YOUR FRIENDS
Build a teetering human tower out of men with wild, swinging appendages. (Arms, we mean!)
★★★★★



HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT
One team tries to blend in with background characters, while the other tries to snipe their faces off.
★★★★★



DECIMATION X3
Fast and furious fixed-screen shooter reinvents *Space Invaders* for the 21st Century.
★★★★★

15 BEST BOSSES EVER

Popes v. worms, clowns v. orcs – it's the battle of the battles as we round up our 15 favourites

Boss battles can be many things – a plot climax, a skill test, a way for developers to show off all of their shiny new tech – but there's one quality they all need to have to qualify for all-time great status: they must be memorable. All of the encounters in this list are moments we're still talking about, years and years later, comings-together of mechanics, stories, design and batshit insanity that, for one reason or another, will never leave our heads. If they're not already jammed into yours too, make sure you rectify that, quick-smart.

SPOILER ALERT: Of course, boss battles are most often used to cap off the action, so you can expect spoilers throughout this list.

Writer: Joe Skrebels

#01

RODRIGO BORGIA
ASSASSIN'S CREED II

If that name doesn't ring a bell, how about we drop a pseudonym of his: Pope Alexander VI. In perhaps the greatest moment of the *Creed* series' history-screwing plot shenanigans, fan favourite Ezio finishes his first outing by squaring up to the combined head of the Roman Catholic Church and of the shadowy Templars, who's gotten his greasy hands on a magical staff. All of which is to say that this often stately, serious game concludes with a famous fat man of history firing lightning at you and making illusory clone decoys of himself. To call it "weird" doesn't do it justice. "Brilliant" does, though.





#02

JEANNE / *BAYONETTA*

Platinum's first masterpiece concludes with a fight against God herself, ending when you punch the Creator into the Sun. This, somehow, isn't that fight. While many of *Bayonetta*'s bosses are truly magnificent, none of them can match the intensity of your repeated match-ups with our protagonist's fellow Umbran Witch, Jeanne. After playing a game in which you are constantly the strongest, fastest being in the world, suddenly coming up against an equal is absolutely thrilling, and a huge test of how much you've learned. Jeanne doesn't ask you to show off how good you are at the game, she challenges you to be as good as *she* is. And she is very, very good.

#03

ARTORIAS / *DARK SOULS*

Artorias' story is tragic, wonderful and, in classic *Souls* style, merely hinted at throughout the game. He doesn't even make an appearance until the DLC content – at which point the stories of his heroism, corruption, and love for a massive wolf all come into sharp focus. Artorias was a knight, true of heart and keen to protect the weak – which made his fall all the crueller. In an attempt to shield his huge pet, he's corrupted by the darkness of the Abyss and transformed into a howling, insane wreck, unpredictable and vicious. The scariest thing? It's hinted that the only reason you can beat him at all is because he's fighting one-handed.





#04

SCARECROW
BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

One boss, three fights, almost no challenge. Scarecrow's by no means your classic test of skill, but a way of delving into our protagonist's psyche more thoroughly, exploring his tortured past and internalised fears that he's the truly crazy one. Dr Jonathan Crane offers one of *Asylum*'s most memorable moments for many aggrieved players. The start of your third encounter is a perfect fit for the cruel trickster villain – the game pretends it's glitched out and restarted, offering a twisted new view of the game's opening (if you didn't immediately reset). We've switched off games because of tough boss fights before, but this is ridiculous.

#05

RIFTWORM
GEARS OF WAR 2

Giganto-bosses? Yawn. Mindless creatures worshipped as gods by alien hordes? Zzzz. But a fight set *inside* that boss creature, over much of its eight mile length? Sign us up. After finding themselves swallowed by a Riftworm, one of the very creatures that made Sera's Locust invasion possible, Delta Squad do the only reasonable thing: travel down a length of guts that resemble an old *Tomb Raider* level, chainsawing veins the width of dogs, fighting off symbiotic stomach organisms and outrunning a wall of gross inner juices. It's a half-hour tour of the inside of the enemy. We wish we could have this for all bosses.





#06

THE END / *METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER*

Hideo Kojima's bosses are almost always a cut above, but The End is a masterclass in how to hone a single mechanic into a true test. He is a sniper and nothing more, asking you to use sound and vision to track his location, make a shot and repeat. It's tense but strangely calm fare, a duel between two great soldiers rather than the carnage we're used to from these kinds of battles. That said, if for some reason you did want to skip the brilliant fight, you can just save, wait a week in real time and find out that the centenarian has passed away from old age. Snake won't be very happy about it, though.

#07

B-WIN
SUNSET OVERDRIVE

Insomniac's Technicolor open-world shooter is haunted by real-life Community Manager Brandon Winfrey, who presents the in-game Sunset TV news show. His bombastic, YouTube-aping style was... not popular with fans initially. Always keen to engage, however, he and Insomniac devised a wonderful solution to make players happier to see him: in DLC pack *Dawn of the Rise of the Fallen Machines*, Winfrey becomes final boss B-Win, a cloud of nanobots inhabiting a group of TV screens that feature Winfrey gurning and screaming insults. It's beautiful, and almost sad, when he shouts "Ha, that didn't hurt *nearly* as much as some tweets I've seen" while you try to kill him.



#08

THE TRAVELLER / *TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS*

The Traveller, a big hunk of alien evil, isn't particularly remarkable in himself – but the fact that he becomes the centrepiece of a proper action sequence in the usually sedate space of a Telltale game very much is. The battle, in which your chosen heroes convene, Power Rangers style, inside the gigantified body of robo-pal Gortys, is brilliant – a thrilling way to send off the friends you've made throughout the series, packed with in-jokes and truly spectacular action skills. Not many full-on action experiences manage to make their climactic battle feel this cool; that an adventure game did is a marvel.





#09

SMAUGAN
NINJA GAIDEN

Team Ninja's horrifyingly hard brawler was among the first times we learned just how crucial – and satisfying – a defensive dodge could be in a game that seems like it's all about offence. In a game of insanely tough tests, Smaugan stands out as the one that teaches that lesson above all. You might think a mystical Flame Dragon would be an easy target, but this battle's set across tiny platforms that the boss rarely comes near. It's a huge reflex test, asking you to avoid plumes of flame, snapping jaws and searing winds, scoring what few hits you can. Once Smaugan goes down, you'll be breathing as hard as Ryu.

#10

YOUR NEMESIS / *MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR*

Bosses are most often established villains, with reams of plot to make you realise why you should want to kill them. In *Shadow of Mordor*, where any Orc can become a named character, this boss is simply the guy you met the most times and never managed to kill off. The result is a totally unique history, written by your actions and the procedural generation at the game's core. When it really works, when you fully hate the guy standing between you and Sauron, it's like no other boss battle in recent memory – so much so that it absolutely ruins the actual final battle, which seems pitiful by comparison.



#11

ENDER DRAGON / *MINECRAFT*

In its pitiless conquest of all of games, Mojang went ahead and created one of the medium's most dangerous bosses, just because it could. Just reaching the Ender Dragon – known also as "Jean?" – is a trial, involving complex crafting and the murder of rare, dangerous Enderman mobs. Then there's the fact she's constantly healed by out-of-the-way crystals. And that she rarely heads to ground level, meaning you need to be handy with a bow. And the way she can do up to 7.5 hearts of damage in a single hit. The fact that you can only return home safely to the Overworld by killing her is the final kick in the cuboid nuts. Have fun!





#12

JOKER/JOHNNY CHARISMA

BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

Following in the footsteps of its early work with Scarecrow, Rocksteady created another one of gaming's oddest, most memorable and, yes, easiest bosses in its last Batman game. Hallucinating as he squares up to bomb-strapped, Joker-blood-infected cabaret scumbag Johnny Charisma, Batman's forced to listen to Joker sing a jazz number about killing his friends – while you take control of Robin and defuse the threats strewn around the room. The biggest threat is getting distracted by just how good the song, "Who's Laughing Now," is, but it's another perfect look into the mind of ol' Bats by way of a boss battle.

#13

KRAUSER / *RESIDENT EVIL 4*

Mikami's masterwork was a monumental attempt to re-teach players how not just *Resi* but action games could work, and Krauser is your final exam at the end of the lesson. Your showdown with the deranged military man comprises speedy QTEs, ultra-accurate shootouts, a timed chase scene, a miniature puzzle and, of course, a head-to-head battle against a mutant man who grows a sort of wing of blades, like some kind of vengeful turkey. It's everything that *Resident Evil 4* stands for – including boundless generosity, given that Krauser turns up again to fight Ada Wong in the post-game extra campaign.





#14

BOB BARBAS / *DMC*

For a man with that haircut, it's pretty impressive that Barbas is centre of one of the most stylish boss fights of all time. Thrust inside the living titles of a Fox-style news channel, Dante's pitted against the corrupted, static-spitting digital head of a Glenn Beck-alike opinion maestro. Occasionally, you're portrayed from helicopter cam, accompanied by hate-filled live commentary on your actions, and the rest of the time you're dodging painful digital interference, while we get a behind-the-scenes look at the foul mouth of a man "just doin' God's work". It's sumptuous stuff, and a neat spin on Ninja Theory's combination of action-platforming brilliance.

#15

STONE IDOL TITAN

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW

We've talked about very clever, tricky bosses, but there's only one thing we truly want: size. The bigger a boss, and the more we can climb all over it, the better. *Lords of Shadow* offered not one but three titans to battle, extra-violent takes on the *Shadow of the Colossus* formula, combining desperate jumps across moving terrain and massive damage to weak spots. It's classic stuff, and the Stone Idol Titan remains a high point – not least because it still looks better than most new-gen games. If you want the feeling of fighting the impossible, climbing a giant ad-hoc statue so ancient that trees have grown into the cracks and so powerful that it can control gravity, here's your answer.



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XBOX EXTRA

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ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE

That murdering won't get done by itself.



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A load of unreadable gibberish.



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OXM INVESTIGATES

Uncovering the other side of Xbox gaming

ODDBALL SPORTS LEAGUE

We celebrate 12 wonderfully weird games that refuse to stick to the sporting script

Authentic sports simulations can be good fun, particularly if you have a personal investment in the pastime being re-created. The trouble with realism, however, is that it doesn't always make for sparkling entertainment – as anyone who's slogged out a defensive 0-0 draw on *FIFA* will attest. Sure, it might be more true-to-life this way, but as Three Fields Entertainment's *Dangerous Golf* proves this month, it's much more fun when you break the rules. And better still if you glue the pieces back together in unexpected shapes. In the spirit of unfair play, then, we've picked out a dozen Xbox sports games that do things a little differently – the dafter the better.

//Monkey Target combines ski-jumping with hang-gliding to delightful effect, and altering where you land is like mid-air curling//



RedCard

FOOTBALL CRAZY IN EVERY SENSE

The only red card you're likely to see in Midway's 2002 footy game is the one on the box, with referees happy to let shin-shredding challenges go unpunished. But that's the least of the weirdness. There's bullet-time bicycle kicks, a team of dolphins (we don't mean the NFL kind) and Chris Kamara. Unbelievable, Jeff.



Blitz: The League II

GRISLY GRIDIRON WILL HAVE YOU CROSSING YOUR LEGS

Beyond the feuds, extortion and spiked drinks of the story mode, Midway's spin on American football is famed for gruesome injuries. Launch into a tackle and you can mash a button to fracture bones and rip muscles as the camera cuts to a gleefully gory internal view.



3 on 3 NHL Arcade

SLAP SHOTS + SLAPSTICK = PUCKING BRILLIANT

Hats off to whichever flustered EA Sports exec, asked to pitch an arcade sports spin-off, blurted out "Ice hockey crossed with *Mario Kart*. With giant heads!" The surprisingly solid rink action is augmented by a range of power-ups, with bananas causing comedy pratfalls and goalies shrinking to even tinier size.



Outlaw Volleyball

BUMP, SET, SPIKE, AND LOUD NOISES

Not, as the title suggests, a call to ban the sport sometimes described as "a good walk along a beach spoiled", but a pretty straight – and surprisingly good – sim "enlivened" by a roster of dubious stereotypes and crude commentary. Still, Steve Carell (yes, really) wrings lots of yuks from unpromising material.



NBA Jam

THIS HD UPDATE IS A REAL SLAM-DUNK

Midway's two-on-two arcade classic got a thoughtful, sensitive update in 2010, meaning it remains just the right side of lunatic. With big heads, big air and boomshakalaka, it's a superbly silly take on America's other national sport – not least as you set up a grudge match between Democrats and Republicans.



Virtua Tennis 4

CHAMPION PLAYERS ATTRACT ALL THE CHICKS

Andy Murray would have far more competition as British No.1 if the LTA took a leaf from Sega's training manual. Thumping returns through rows of plates is a cathartic joy, while leading a line of newborn chicks to their mother without letting a stray ball squish them is a heck of a way to improve your court speed.



Rory McIlroy PGA Tour

COURSE CORRECTION WITH A TWIST

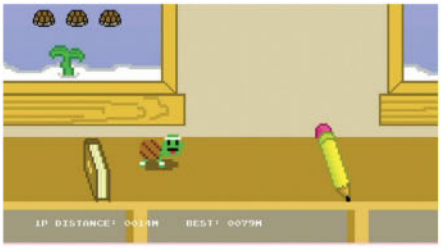
As Pat Benatar once sang (but we may have misheard slightly), golf is a battlefield. It's an adage EA Sports has taken literally, surmising that players who've conquered Sawgrass and bested Royal Troon might enjoy the challenge of lofting a nine iron over a naval carrier that just ploughed through the fairway.



Aggressive Inline

TRUST US – IT'S WHEELY, WHEELY GOOD

Aggressive inline skating – a.k.a. rollerblading – sounds like an oxymoron. What's next, Belligerent Jogging? Confrontational Crochet? And yet, in 2002, Acclaim produced a genuine competitor to the Birdman's crown, inspiring the Tony Hawk series to greater heights – yes, even with Hoobastank on the soundtrack.



Hurdle Turtle

TRY SAYING IT FAST FIVE TIMES

Xbox Live's Indie Games service produced its share of off-kilter sporting games. But despite some impressive physics, *Mount Your Friends* doesn't quite qualify as a legitimate sport, paving the way for Holmade Games' pixelart cracker to defy conventional wisdom that sprinting is cooler and snatch the gold medal.



Super Monkey Ball Deluxe

WHY TARGET PRACTICE WILL DRIVE YOU APE

Okay, chucking monkeys encased in gachapon capsules down giant ramps and flying them to floating targets isn't strictly a sport, but *SMB*'s Monkey Target mode combines ski-jumping and hang-gliding to delightful effect, while the ability to directly affect where you land after the throw is curiously akin to mid-air curling.



Backyard Wrestling: Don't Try This At Home

WE ALWAYS HANG IN A JUGGALO STANCE

This 18-rated grappler is a guilty multiplayer pleasure, as you use fair means or foul (mostly foul) to defeat opponents. Characterful, brutal, and not limited to backyards: you find yourself battling at truck stops and abattoirs, and even fight as hip hop oddballs Insane Clown Posse.



Sega Soccer Slam

THE BEST SPORTS GAME YOU'VE (PROBABLY) NEVER PLAYED

There's no such thing as a dead ball in Black Box Games' wonderful, unsung arcade footy game: it keeps it all moving at a thrillingly brisk pace. The secret of its brilliance? It's built with the design rigour of a serious sim but injected with a hefty dose of fun. A lost classic.

NOW PLAYING

The games we
still going
to, an



Future assassins have big boots to fill when it comes to beating the entertaining repartee between Evie and Jacob Frye.

Louise Blain is playing...

Assassin's Creed Syndicate



BECAUSE... "There's always more sightseeing to do in Victorian London"

LOVING The fact that London goes on living around you. **HATING** No one ever actually puts their umbrellas down.

My name's Louise and it's been 30 days since I had my last fix of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. That's 720 hours since I spent an entire evening feeling guilty about murdering every human being within stabbing distance as Jack the Ripper in the suitably grim, murdery DLC. It's probably time to go back to London.

Dropping into the capital with Evie after so many days away is a refreshing experience. It's exactly how I feel when I actually go to London for the day and realise that's where all the people in the world seem to be, but without the desire to leave after 15 minutes because *that's where all the people in the world seem to be*. A trip to the map screen shows that despite my complete Achievement checklist, I haven't finished everything and there are markers for Inspector Abberline, Clara O'Dea, Ned Wynert and Henry Green. What follows is the most British thing *Syndicate* has ever done as each individual *thanks* Jacob and Evie personally for their hard work. Clara even gives Evie a hug. Someone needs to make Ubisoft Quebec a cream tea, stat.

In typical English fashion, the sky greys over, it starts to drizzle and puddles form underfoot. Seas of umbrellas appear on The Strand as people shelter from the rain. Assassins have no such luck. Ironically, I can't even put Evie's hood up without going into Stealth mode, so she'll just have to grin and bear it. It's then that I notice a crowd of people all dropping their umbrellas. There's been a carriage accident and it's literally put all the NPCs off their game. Giant black umbrellas blow down the street like some kind of Burton-esque nightmare. This can't be how Londoners get rid of their umbrellas. Surely they don't just litter and leave it to a gust?

One dapper gent in a top hat and a scarf grips resolutely to his umbrella, so I decide Evie should follow him. Oh look, an *AC* tailing mission I *want* to do. I trot along a few paces behind, passing an orphan who picks up something from the street before chasing the man who dropped it. Umbrella man continues, oblivious. A member of Templar gang the Blighters steps off the pavement shouting, "There go the Rooks. The gang that collectively share half a brain!" Evie and I carry on, stiff upper lips intact.

It's stopped raining, yet Umbrella Man is still holding his umbrella aloft. We quest onward. I'm just at the stage where I'm wondering if he has a family when I realise we're back where we started. There's nothing else for it. I bump into him. The umbrella falls and he glares at Evie. I knock him again, hoping even to hear his voice. There's nothing, only silence as he stares and walks away. I've gone from Jack the Ripper to Evie the Mild Inconvenience. I really need to go back to murder. ■

DETAILS

Released October 2015

Dev Ubisoft

Pub Ubisoft

Format Xbox One

Score 7/10

Recap This hooded adventure in Victorian London sees twin assassins Evie and Jacob Frye form a gang and take on the Templars from the London underground. No, not the one with the gap.

//The umbrella falls and he glares at Evie. I knock him again, hoping even to hear his voice. There's nothing//







We're sorry to announce that train delays are due to a (sync) points failure.

NOW PLAYING



Martin Kitts is playing...

Just Cause 3



BECAUSE... "Sometimes it's better the devil you know"

LOVING Being undisputed master of all I survey **HATING** Finding that there's nowhere left for me to 'liberate'

Hey Rico, our saviour," says a militiaman as he passes me on the streets of a newly liberated town. I nod in acknowledgment but my attention is focused on the task at hand. I tighten a knot and tug a cord and – success! – another sleepy citizen rises to his feet and dances in my honour as a mariachi band strikes up a tune. I'm the king of the world!

My human catapulting technique is getting better all the time. Early attempts involved hoisting people up a flagpole and trying to launch them over buildings, like a bungee jump in reverse. While amusing, it didn't really get much attention from the locals, so I moved on to a more sophisticated two-bungee method.

After selecting a suitable location (archways are ideal) and choosing a volunteer (the first person to walk past) I carefully attach ropes to each arm, fixing them to opposite walls. Gently tweaking the left trigger turns one lucky citizen into an Olympic-calibre gymnast, flipping and twirling with joyful abandon. By putting on such displays in public areas I hope to remind the population of Medici, freed from the tyranny of the evil General Di Ravello, that they can become anything their hearts desire. That their wildest ambitions are totally within their grasp.

Perhaps I'm oversimplifying things by assuming that everybody in Medici dreams of having grappling hooks shot through their limbs and being rattled off the walls in front of their family and friends, but so far I've had nothing but positive feedback. "This is the real General," purred one admirer, after I'd strung up her grandfather in an unorthodox but crowd-pleasing legs-akimbo configuration. Comments like that make it all worthwhile.

The one thing I don't want is for my people to grow bored of these events. Although they undoubtedly get a thrill from knowing that any time they see me parachuting into town it could be their turn to become a shooting star, I do like to mix things up a bit. To that end I've started fitting performers with explosive crotch-rockets, which can be truly spectacular in the right location. As a jet of flame bursts forth from the trouser region and a lucky citizen gyrates in a high-G jig of delight, I stand well back and watch proudly, knowing that after years of brutal oppression the fire of freedom burns strongly in my comrades' hearts (and pants). ■

//I've started fitting performers with explosive crotch-rockets, which can be truly spectacular in the right location//

DETAILS

Released December 2015

Dev Avalanche Studios

Pub Square Enix

Format Xbox One

Score 6/10

Recap Heavily armed flying psycho liberates a country by bombing it into rubble.

Alex Dale is playing...

Burnout 3: Takedown



BECAUSE... "I like some order to my chaos"

LOVING Seeing a thoughtfully planned crash pay dividends **HATING** Tumbling into a Heartbreaker at the last second

Burnout's Crash mode, but with a golf ball – that's how Three Fields Entertainment, the studio founded by several of the top talents behind the *Burnout* series, describes *Dangerous Golf* (see page 56 for more). That mouth-watering proposition put me in the mood to boot up an old *Burnout* game, commandeer the nearest sports car and handbrake turn it right into the middle of rush hour traffic.

And why not? Pretty much everyone who's enjoyed the company of Criterion's car-mangling racing series has fond memories of *Burnout*'s add-on Crash mode – what better way is there to destress after being pipped to the finish line than to send a car that costs more than your *entire life* careening into a fuel tanker? But watch out, because here comes the hot take: my favourite crash



mode is everyone's least favourite – *Burnout 3: Takedown*'s.

With its fist-pumping theatrics and titular takedowns, *Burnout 3* was the beginning of the series' thematic shift from straight arcade racer to high-octane gimmick fest, and its Crash mode wasn't immune. Junctions were littered with garish floating icons that offered different effects if your car happened to tumble over them mid-crash – score multipliers and boosts were necessary if you harboured hopes of a gold medal, while the Crashbreaker set your car on fire, causing the dominos to begin falling all over again. Not all icons tempted you in; the Heartbreaker cut your score in half and could single-handedly wreck even the dreamiest of runs.

Takedown's detractors claim that these icons wreck the mode's innocence and purity – instead of it being about making the biggest pile-up imaginable, the focus turns to collecting these icons. But in my infinitely contrarian way, that's what I like most about it. *Takedown*'s multipliers make meaning of the chaos and transform it into a cool, logical puzzle that allows for preplanning and experimentation. If *Dangerous Golf* is to succeed, there's no question which *Burnout* game it needs to crib from. ■

DETAILS

Released September 2004
Dev Criterion Games
Pub EA
Format Xbox
Score 9/10

Ben Griffin is playing...

Outlast: Whistleblower



BECAUSE... "It features the single-most wince-inducing moment on Xbox"

LOVING The sweet relief when the horrendous ordeal finally ends. **HATING** The crazy dude who tries to castrate me.

Yeah, so I'm hiding in a locker witnessing a naked man strapped to a gurney have his genitals forcibly removed with a rusty knife. But wait, let's rewind a little. The title of *Outlast*'s downloadable content, *Whistleblower*, refers to me, Waylon Park, a software engineer who exposes corporate corruption to the main game's protagonist in a tell-all email (that corruption being scientific experiments on mentally ill patients).



Only I'm caught sending it and have to flee into the bowels of psychiatric hospital Mount Massive Asylum – bowels that are flooded by a spontaneous surge of homicidal escaped inmates. I've seen a man try to cook another man inside a microwave, kicked my way out of a brick stove, and all this before meeting that corpse with a disembodied head stuck between its legs like a breaching baby. That's a sight that'll stay with me.

It all pales, however, compared to the predicament I currently find myself in. After passing out I wake up to find I'm now tied to a table completely starkers, genitals fullscreen. The figure ahead wants to make "an honest woman" of me, literally, and despite him generously complimenting my "amazing bone structure" and "soft skin" I still feel like this situation is going to places I'm not comfortable with. "A woman has to suffer some things. It's not pleasant but try to endure, for the sake of our children," he says. "A few snips of the flesh." I'm starting to think he's not well.

The saw blade spins closer. I'm wincing so much in real life my eyelids fold in on themselves. As in the best kind of horror, this is unpleasant. Suddenly the sadistic loon is attacked from the shadows by another and they scrap like dinosaurs at the end of *Jurassic Park* while I use the distraction to snap the brittle bonds tying me down and slink away. That's the good thing about loons – they're not biased.

I'm intact but still trapped in a lunatic asylum. My thoughts, as I crawl naked through the darkness trying to make my escape, are basically if you have a decent wage and moderate job security and you feel like blowing the whistle on some unethical practices, don't. ■

DETAILS

Released May 2014
Dev Red Barrels
Pub Red Barrels
Format Xbox One
Score 8/10

THE OXM REPLAY

Revisiting the resolutionally-challenged



In *Brotherhood*, subtlety became less of a priority when you could just shoot men in the face.

Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood

Ezio's mad middle episode explodes like a Roman candle, reckons Ben Griffin



DETAILS
Dev Ubisoft Montreal
Pub Ubisoft
Released Nov 2010
Scored 8/10

No, that wasn't a cheese dream. Leonardo da Vinci really does build you a tank in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. His wonky creation resembles a flat-pack wooden Dalek, moves like a possessed hockey puck, and even manages to eclipse your Holy showdown with an actual Pope during the last game's climax. Since 2010, *Brotherhood*'s historical hysteria has faded into a strange list of back-of-the-brain events you can't believe happened, but I can confirm they all did.

The series' third entry bucks the time-hopping trend by lying in state – the state of Rome, to be exact, the beating heart of Templar power. Here Ezio Auditore da Firenze recruits rebels for his burgeoning Brotherhood in order to cripple notorious bastard Cesare's operations and, should the opportunity arise, his legs too. In a game that could have simply felt like a slow curve on the arc of Ezio's ascent to master assassin it instead formed the most important instalment, his trilogy's *Dark Knight* or *Empire Strikes Back*.

//Da Vinci's ridiculously revisionist War Machine missions are the highlight//

For the first time you don't fight alone. Saving citizens set upon by Templar nasties invites them to your Tiber Island headquarters and steadily expands your guild from one or two trainees to a sprawling network of skilled stabbers. Pressing LB instantly summons up to five who burst out of bushes and spring from sewers to the screech of an eagle before fighting your corner and disappearing in a cloud of smoke. Loyal to a fault, you can literally shoot one in the head and nobody remaining will flinch.

A finger whistle is all it takes to leverage the members of your Brotherhood, and aside from sending them forth to eliminate anyone who so much as speaks to you in a funny accent, it changes how to tackle more fortified areas. You can, for example, march confidently into a stronghold clicking fingers to call down assassinations and swiftly eliminate guards in the way. In *Brotherhood*, unlike before, you lead from the light rather than follow from the shadows.

Although you can only have a few on-demand underlings at once, you have a whole division available for contract missions across the globe through a sort of guild management bolt-on. Sending them to attend a banquet in London or spread rumours in Barcelona not only upgrades the assassins' weapons and armour but also nets you money to buy your own. Mmm, those are some good spaulders. An Ezio able to call on connections and use influence he built up from the last game gives it a sense of legacy.

It's entirely less serious, too. Da Vinci's ridiculously revisionist War Machine missions are the highlight, delighting in taking profound liberties with the time period. There's one where you live out your pigeon fantasies by strapping on a pair of giant flappy wings and soaring over enemy settlements, dropping explosive bombardments on them, and another in which you man a cannon so powerful it wouldn't be built for another few centuries in real life. That's da Vinci for you, who, despite being a painter, anatomist, sculptor, cartographer, mathematician, architect and botanist also found time in 16th century Italy to invent the machine gun (you use one of these, too). It's powerfully daft.

Presumably looking to avoid an Italian Renaissance *Saints Row*, main



Calling reinforcements with a wave of the hand lets you run the streets like never before.





INFLUENCED BY...
ASSASSIN'S CREED II
Follows its plot and has an older evolution of its hero.



INFLUENCE ON...
SHADOW OF MORDOR
An open world across which to clamber and kill.

story missions are less dramatic, often boiling down to eavesdropping, pickpocketing and tracking targets from rooftops as they walk slowly through the streets. This continued to later *Creeds*, where Ubisoft is often guilty of dazzling you with scale while dithering on substance. What you can always count on, however, is a spectacular setting. Where activities repeat, locations are enthralling.

Rome is rife with history, from gleaming white aqueducts, olive gardens and marble public baths, to the more overtly iconic Colosseum, Pantheon, and ancient forum. Although in the intervening years visuals have faded and the scale's shrunk, crossing the expanse on your own steed remains a defining memory. While *Brotherhood* could've felt like a strange stopgap while people awaited a more drastic change of scenery, it was the satisfying payoff to *Assassin's Creed II*, a bar-raiser for Ezio's next journey, and the most vital act of his story. ■



WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?
Syndicate borrows the brotherhood bits, letting you call carriage-driving cockney gang mates.

GAME ROULETTE



Every month, OXM dips into its Games Cupboard of Doom and plucks out a random game from Xbox history. Will it be a classic or a howler? Let the balls decide...

THIS MONTH... WITHOUT WARNING

Old games inevitably reflect the pop culture of their time. Take *Without Warning*, a grey and derivative shooter from 2005 that hoped to piggyback onto the hot TV ticket of the time – *24*, an action thriller in which each episode covered an hour of counter-terrorist agent Jack Bauer's life in real time.

Without Warning apes this premise shamelessly, following a terrorist takeover of a chemical plant in real time, except over 12 hours instead of 24 – an early foreshadowing that this would turn out to be a half-assed take on the Bauer format.

//This would turn out to be a half-assed take on the Bauer format//

It was actually built on a solid idea of its own – the story was split six ways between different characters caught up in the mayhem, from straggling soldiers who survive a breach-gone-wrong to a TV news guy who just wants a scoop. But in practice, this basically splits the games two ways – shooting and stealth – neither of which are ably tackled by the programmers. A more crushing blow is the way the respective stories don't so much intertwine as they do mash together – you have to replay some sections again and again with different guys and, let us tell you, they didn't exactly have you punching the air and shouting 'whoopee' the first time.

Without Warning came with a bit of pedigree – it was the first game from Circle Studio, formed by top talent from Core Design, which created *Tomb Raider*. After this mega-flop, they transitioned into making DVD games, before quietly folding in 2007.



LIVE SPOT-LIGHT

Reports from Xbox's biggest communities



This Valhalla remake is incredibly accurate.

Halo 5

Exploring the latest happenings in Forge

Details **Dev** 343 Industries / **Pub** Microsoft / **Reporter** Martin Kitts



The podracers are made of Ghosts with bolted-on junk.





This frying pan hosts a barmy pancake-flipping deathmatch.

The community playlists seem to be short-lived special events rather than permanent fixtures, and accessing other players' files remains a fiddly process, but Forge is proving to be a big hit in *Halo 5*.

Every map from previous *Halo* games has been remade, with varying degrees of success. Some have been attempted by several different creators. There's a lot of different versions of these files around, but users have been collating the best ones on the **halowaypoint.com** forums. Check there for which user you have to friend to get the 'official' version.

We're impressed by Halvalla, a super accurate remake of *Halo 3*'s Valhalla map – as with all these things, *Halo 5*'s sticky boots and clambering ability allow you to scale previously impervious walls, so it's never going to play exactly the same, but it's as close as you're likely to get.

Sandtrap is another *Halo 3* favourite that's been redone to great effect, with the tall structures and open spaces combining amusingly well with *Halo 5*'s ground-pound move. A stomp from the highest point takes a few seconds to land. Remakes of levels from other games are also popular, with the classic *Unreal Tournament* map Facing Worlds being one of the better ones.

As ever, the most eye-catching maps are those designed for purely aesthetic reasons. *Star Wars* is a popular theme, with vehicles from a humble TIE fighter to a vast Star Destroyer available to walk around or even to fly. The best of these is surely the Boonta podracing map, which has loads of fully functional craft to pilot around a big racetrack. You have to put up with some camera weirdness, but the map does showcase the ability of Forge's weather and lighting effects to make levels look very un-Forge-like.

With the first batch of community maps folded into the main playlists, and 343's own variations on the likes of Grifball incoming, we can expect to see a lot more of Forge. Now how about that file browser?

ON THE CLOCK
How we spent our time in the game



25% Searching forums for hot tips
10% Sending friend requests to complete strangers
40% Pulling levels to bits to see how they're made
25% Marvelling at the creativity of the Forge community

//The Boonta podracing map has loads of functional craft to pilot around a racetrack//

IF YOU DO ONE THING IN FORGE THIS MONTH, MAKE IT... Downloading something bizarre – you may be the first to play *Halo*'s next big mode.





WWE 2K16 Future Stars Pack

A save-file glitch even worse than people telling us wrestling is fake

Dev Yuke's, Visual Concepts / **Pub** 2K Sports /
Reporter Tom Stone

Iffy submission system aside, this is the smoothest and most authentic WWE game to date, 'raved' our 7/10 review of *WWE 2K16* last Christmas. But with the Future Stars DLC, our pleasure has become contempt. Someone get us a chair to smash over its back, because the DLC contains a major glitch. For many, it was resetting the game's Universe Mode, wiping all their save data.

"After initial investigation, we've found this issue only affects PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions of the game," said Bryan Vore, the *2K16* community manager. "PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 users will not experience this issue." That sound you hear is the noise of last-gen fans chuckling as they hurl another (lower resolution) man mountain from the ring. Vore also recommended not downloading the Future Stars pack until the issue was resolved, a tip that's about as obvious as "don't take the disc out of the Xbox One and snap it over your knee." Maybe he theorised that wrestling fans take a lot of blows to the head? We couldn't possibly comment.

//Guess you should've bought our game for last-gen consoles//

But hey, we all make mistakes and it's not like this has happened before. Apart from last year, when this happened before. A glitch in *2K15* meant the game occasionally asked you to accept its online terms and conditions again. With no choice but to accept, players found they'd lose items they'd unlocked and progress in Universe Mode (sound familiar?). As The Undertaker would famously put it, "I pity the fool who releases such a glitch-ridden product year on year. Fo' shame, *2K16*." Wait a minute, that's not The Undertaker's catchphrase! Dammit, *2K16*! Can't you get anything right? ■

IF YOU DO ONE THING IN WWE 2K16 THIS MONTH, MAKE IT... Getting the now patched DLC pack – if you're willing to risk it.





Destiny

Bungie's Valentine's Day gesture backfires, leaves community nursing a broken heart

Dev Bungie / **Pub** Activision /
Reporter Alex Dale

Have you ever tried to save a troubled relationship by planning a "make-or-break" holiday with the object of your affections, only to have the travel plans go awry? There's no quicker way to Splitsville than to be marooned in a rain-drenched car, slowing stewing in each other's company. *Destiny*'s big Valentine's Day themed event, Crimson Days, began with similar good intentions but thanks to stingy hand-outs just left the unhappy couples feeling they'd wasted their time.

Crimson Days was a special two-on-two game mode that encouraged you to create a fireteam with your bae. The topical twist was that if your partner fell in combat, you became infused with the power of a Broken Heart. In real life, of course, a broken heart gives you the stomach to consume inhuman amounts of ice cream and a higher-than-normal tolerance to Roxette songs; but in *Destiny*, the special powers bestowed upon you are somewhat more practical: a stat boost that makes you quicker on the draw and faster at healing.

//A broken reward system left players feeling jilted//

As *Halo* fans know, two-on-two firefights can really suck you in because unlike in larger game modes, there's no place for shirkers to hide – you're entirely dependent on teamwork to survive.

Alas, in *Destiny* the worth of anything is measured in loot, and a broken reward system left Crimson Days players feeling jilted, with some of them completing over 100 games without even a sniff of the promised 320 Light Ghost Shells. Bungie eased the heartbreak by later awarding the items to any couples who completed seven rounds – although they had to actually compete in them. No Romeo and Juliet suicide pacts here, thank you. ■

IF YOU DO ONE THING IN DESTINY THIS MONTH, MAKE IT... Men are from Mars, women from Venus; compromise and go for a date on the Moon.

MOVIES ON YOUR XBOX

This month in uninteractive entertainment



The Martian's alien exteriors were shot in the red desert of Wadi Rum, Jordan.

The Martian

Starring Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Jeff Daniels, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Sean Bean
Price £9.99 (HD to buy)

Director Ridley Scott is responsible for two of the greatest science fiction films of all time in *Alien* and *Blade Runner*. Having recently scampered back to the genre with a *Prometheus*-shaped stinker (and threatened us with part two), *The Martian* isn't simply a return to past glories, it's one of 2015's most enthralling rides.

Based on the novel by Andy Weir, it's the story of Mark Watney, a botanist, mechanical engineer and NASA astronaut forced to "science the shit" out of countless problems in order to survive when he's abandoned on Mars. Where the novel revels in technical minutiae, this big screen adaptation is such a joy because it strikes the perfect balance between the scientific and the personal. Drew Goddard's script zings with gallows humour, an incongruous disco soundtrack is the source of countless laughs and Damon is superbly likable as the unyielding Watney. Smart, heartfelt and, at times, breath-snatchingly exciting, *The Martian* is a triumph.

//Smart, heartfelt and, at times, breath-snatchingly exciting//

CULTURE CORNER BOOKS



FABLES: THE WOLF AMONG US VOLUME 2 by Matthew Sturges

WHAT IS IT?
A comic based on Telltale's *The Wolf Among Us*, which was itself a prequel to Bill Willingham's comic book *Fables*.

WHY'S IT GOOD?
The Wolf Among Us was ace and the comic expands on it with new characters and sequences.

WILL IT MAKE ME SEEM COOLER?
With its rad neon colour palette and funky soundtrack, *Fables* was the coolest game in yonks. It's only natural cool has rubbed off here.



The Walk

Starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Charlotte Le Bon, Ben Kingsley
Price £4.95 (HD to rent)

The incredible true story of Philippe Petit's death-defying high wire walk between the Twin Towers gets a mostly pants dramatic retelling. Until the nail-biting walk itself, which is so spectacular it almost makes up for the preceding 90 minutes.



Everest

Starring Jason Clarke, Jake Gyllenhaal, Keira Knightley
Price £4.49 (HD to rent)

Twin expeditions to climb Everest go wrong in this visually dazzling but narratively lacking survival-thriller. No film has done such an impressive job of putting you on that mountain, but it's hard to care for characters this thinly sketched – odd given they're based on real people.



Macbeth

Starring Michael Fassbender, Marion Cotillard, Sean Harris
Price £4.49 (HD to rent)

This violent and fantastically earthy retelling of Shakespeare's Scottish play is one of the best cinematic adaptations of the Bard's work yet. Even better, the creative team behind it have all reteamed for the *Assassin's Creed* movie, which bodes very well.



Legend

Starring Tom Hardy, Tom Hardy, Emily Browning, Christopher Eccleston
Price £4.49 (HD to rent)

Tom Hardy is superb in the larger-than-life dual roles of Ronnie and Reggie Kray in this romantic retelling of the twin gangsters' rise to power. But the story is reduced to standard gangland fare, and elevating the Krays to local heroes is problematic.

OXM PICKS: MARS MORSELS



Total Recall
Amazon Instant Video
Arnie gets his ass to Mars in the '80s classic about a construction worker who discovers he's a super spy.



Doom
Microsoft Movies & TV
Astronomically dumb game adaptation that's worth enduring for the fabulously fun first-person sequence.



Mars Attacks
Microsoft Movies & TV
Bug-eyed ETs invade Earth in Tim Burton's darkly comic sci-fi. It's got B-movie charm to spare.



Doctor Who
Netflix
A virus turns people into dehydrated undead in *The Waters of Mars*, one of the scariest *Who* stories ever.



Robinson Crusoe on Mars
Microsoft Movies & TV
Daniel Defoe's castaway tale gets transposed to Mars, along with a monkey, in this fab '60s sci-fi.

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XBOX THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

Ready to play

All-new design of the Official Xbox Magazine



NEW ISSUE AVAILABLE 08/04/16
OR ORDER DIRECT FROM MYFAVOURITEMAGAZINES.CO.UK

CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE

XBOX ONE ESSENTIALS

Our shortlist of the finest games currently available



1

METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

PUBLISHER: KONAMI

We thought war was supposed to be hell? Instead, we get a 50-hour, open-world, set-piece-stuffed adventure where no two playthroughs are ever the same. Hideo Kojima's series swansong is one of the finest stealth games ever made.

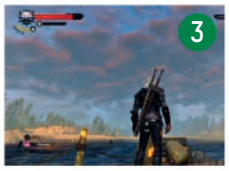


2

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR

What was already an excellent, brutal and beautiful open-world game is made even more so on Xbox One. Now: first-person beatings!



3

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO

One of the most immersive RPGs ever, with side quests deeper than most main campaigns. Beautiful, rewarding and essential.

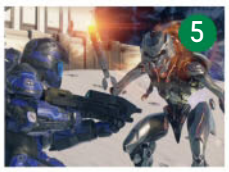


4

ALIEN: ISOLATION

PUBLISHER: SEGA

Pop a Valium and buy some brown trousers, because this tense masterpiece will trick you into thinking you're safe. You're not.



5

HALO 5: GUARDIANS

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT STUDIOS

It's the series-best multiplayer that gets our visors misty: tense, cerebral skirmishes are an oasis of sanity in a sea of crude shooters.

YOURS FOR £10
DISCOUNT GAMES WORTH GETTING



RESIDENT EVIL 6

A return to form? Or the final bullet in true survival horror's coffin? Decide for yourself, for less than a tenner.

Score 8/10 Buy it £4.59 – amazon.co.uk



6

KALIMBA

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT STUDIOS

Steer two totem-pole stumps through a dastardly platforming gauntlet in the puzzler that'll tie your fingers up like Flumps.



7

BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

PUBLISHER: WARNER BROS.

Rocksteady finishes its *Arkham* trilogy on a high. Take the Batmobile for a spin and you'll wonder how you ever explored Gotham without it.



8

FALLOUT 4

PUBLISHER: BETHESDA

Hundreds of hours later, this excellent RPG still has so many secrets to uncover. The first potentially endless *Fallout*.



9

DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

PUBLISHER: EA

Enormous, handsome and in love with the subtleties of world design, storytelling and combat. One of the best RPGs on Xbox One so far.

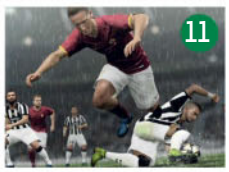


10

FORZA HORIZON 2

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT STUDIOS

Arcadified *Forza* fun for those that can't tell their exhaust from their elbow. Tearing up the Mediterranean brings a tear to our eye.



11

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2016

PUBLISHER: KONAMI

Presentation can be lacking, but 20 years of tweaks and improvements have given us the best pure football game we've ever played.



12

FAR CRY 4

PUBLISHER: UBISOFT

It's like a zoo, but with explosives and guns and dictators and gyrocopters and homicidal tapirs. Top-notch open-world shooting.



13

ORI & THE BLIND FOREST

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT STUDIOS

Imagine a lavish, beautiful storybook world... that slams shut on your stupid, bleeding fingers for seven brutal hours.



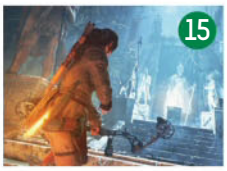
14 **RAINBOW SIX SIEGE**
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
Deep, strategic warfare that's brutally unforgiving, with tension that beats most horror games. Xbox One's smartest multiplayer shooter.

Why you should buy...



RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER
The demo section of the Xbox One store feels like a barren enough tomb to appear in Lara's latest outing. But now there's a free trial of *Rise of the Tomb Raider* available, you've got no excuse not to try this fine mix of platforming, archaeology and creative serial killing. Presumably the third game will have Lara visiting the tombs of the hundreds of people she murders on this brutal Siberian holiday.

TOM STONE
@TheTomStrange



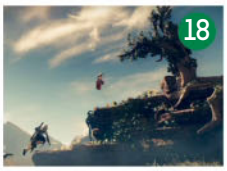
15 **RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER**
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT STUDIOS
Don't be fooled by its frostbitten landscapes; this is a barn-burning action-adventure that packs all its thrills into a dizzying ten hours.



16 **GEARS OF WAR: ULTIMATE EDITION**
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT STUDIOS
The gold standard for remakes. If this is the quality The Coalition is capable of, *Gears 4* is in safe hands.



17 **MINECRAFT**
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT STUDIOS
Want to go hiking? Explore the depths of hell? Recreate Buckingham Palace? Go ahead – all possibilities are open to you.



18 **DESTINY: THE TAKEN KING**
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
An insanely addictive MMO spaceshooter that's got some of the nicest skies you'll see this side of your front door.



19 **SHOVEL KNIGHT**
PUBLISHER: YACHT CLUB GAMES
Brutal platformer that's as fun as it is punishing (read: very). Packed with ideas and lets you smack people with a shovel. Sublime.



20 **RARE REPLAY**
PUBLISHER: RARE
30 classic games for a measly £20? Short of stealing, that's the best deal you'll find on Xbox One. Legal disclaimer: don't start stealing.

BAD BUT GOOD
WE SHOULDN'T LIKE IT, BUT WE REALLY DO



THE WALKING DEAD: SURVIVAL INSTINCT
This ropey survival horror game is completely eclipsed by Telltale's classic. But there are still scares to be found here, and no moral choices mean we feel less guilt afterwards. Just shame for playing it.
£17.95 amazon.co.uk

XBOX 360 BENCHMARKS

The best in show from the Xbox 360's ten-year catalogue



BEST SHOOTER
CALL OF DUTY 4
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
The game that strapped a rocket to the series and made it a cultural icon is also still the best, with a unique intensity.



BEST RPG
DARK SOULS
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO
Punishing but rewarding open-world affair, where the limits of your exploration are defined by skill rather than by numbers.



BEST OPEN-WORLD
RED DEAD REDEMPTION
PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR
This emotional tale of the Wild West's dying days takes place in a landscape so authentic, you can taste the tumbleweed.



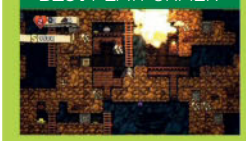
BEST PUZZLER
PORTAL 2
PUBLISHER: VALVE
Takes the original's central conceit of portal-spewing guns and expands it in brilliant, mind-melting ways.



BEST ACTION
BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM
PUBLISHER: WARNER BROS
Tighter and more focused than *City*, this trawl through a prison made us feel so Batman-y our voices dropped an octave.



BEST FIGHTER
ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
Street Fighter II's poise and balance, refreshed and remixed with the technology of today. Also: mad alternative costumes.



BEST PLATFORMER
SPELUNKY
PUBLISHER: MOSSMOUTH
Randomised levels aren't usually classics. But Spelunky's tightly-governed stages put custom designs to shame.



BEST RACER
FORZA MOTORSPORT 4
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT STUDIOS
With more cars and tracks and less emphasis on draining your wallet, *Forza 4* is still the serious racing sim pace-setter.

19 TRYING MESSAGES FROM PLAYERS IN DARK SOULS III

Dark Souls messages materialise from the ether, fleeting glimpses into the soul of a long-dead player drawing a final breath. At least that's what From Software intended. In reality, they're either unreadable gibberish or more irritating than rereading "YOU DIED" for the millionth time



01 "Where's our *Ori and the Blind Forest* sequel?"
We'll never apologise for spamming this all over Drangleic.

02 "It's dangerous to go alone. Take this."
Cheers for the broken straight sword, Captain Helpful.

03 "Illusory Wall Ahead"
A joke that's *so funny* after an hour of smashing all our weapons against unmoving concrete.

04 "Too much fun! I should recommend this to all my cool friends with high disposable income in the lucrative 18-24 demographic!"
Stop leaving messages in our game, Bandai Namco.

05 "Try jumping"
Hope this isn't another ingenious scam to trick us into dying. Wheeee!

06 "New haircut?"
No, we've just been taking a whole load of sword blows straight to the noggin.

07 "Amazing chest ahead!"
Nothing really sells the haunting majesty of *Dark Souls* like the constant breast jokes.

08 "Ready for the mosh pit, shaka brah?"
No lore is more impenetrable than *Life is Strange*'s dialogue.

09 "Amazing chest a-"
Seriously, people. That's enough now.

10 "Amazing ch-"
I WILL STAB YOU IN THE CHEST.

11 "An apple a day keeps the doctor away!"
I'm fatally allergic to apples, you terrible jerk.

12 "Ambush ahead"
Good thing I was reading this message instead of keeping my guard up then.

13 "A winner is you!"
Sometimes I think you don't know me at all.

14 "Bonfire?"
Maliciously placed so we keep selecting the message instead of the bonfire. Thanks, Dark Trolls.

15 "You know what game is really 'whack' and 'hip 2 B square'? Homework!"
Well done for managing to invade our game, mum.

16 "Praise the Sun!"
Yeah, that's not getting old.

17 "Your fists of evil are about to meet my steel wall of niceness."
Them's fighting words. We think.

18 "Praise the Sun!"
If we ever find you, we swear we'll make these your last words.

19 Messages are not available in offline mode
Wait, seriously? *Smashes broken straight sword into modem*

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